

# MORE MUSINGS FROM AN ADDLED MIND

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family and friends who have been putting up with all my shenanigans over, lo, these MANY years.

To them, I am SO very grateful ...

... especially for all the material they provide. I wouldn't have these stories without them voluntarily (or not) joining in the antics.

## Birthdays, Birthdays, Birthdays

SO!

What better way to return from my birthday break than to talk about BIRTHDAYS?!?

If you haven't noticed, we all have them (yes, it's true). However, some people's day of birth is more dramatic than others. For example, I was a month late; coming in (or out, as was the case) at TEN pounds, EIGHT ounces! And I haven't grown much since then. After delivery, my long suffering mother said she could only eat plain spaghetti and rice for a month.

I am guessing she waited the extra month because my older brother, John, was BORN on her birthday. I suppose she was making sure it didn't happen again.

Now, my poor father's brother, John (waaaay too many Johns in my family) was born in a leap year on February 29th. Which set up the conundrum of when to actually celebrate one's birthday. He settled for March 1st. However, I know, if it were me, I'd insist on observances on both February 28th AND March 1st, juuuust to be sure to cover all bases. (Greedy thing, ain't I?)

I do have to hand it to my mommy, though. When it CAME time for our natal days, she made sure we had some gift to open. As I've mentioned more times than you like, we didn't have much moola in my formative years. However, on our special day, there was ALWAYS a wrapped birthday present sitting at our place at the table when we came down to breakfast. Most of the time, there also was a gift or a card with MONEY from her parents, Grammie and Pa. (I'm sure it took Pa a while to forgive me for locking him out of his garage ... but bygones will be bygones, water under the bridge, an eye for an eye ... no, not that last one ...)

My dad's birthday is on November 22nd, the same day President Kennedy was shot. (That's a way to never forget your birthday!) The two sides of our family had planned a VERY rare birthday gathering for that very year. And, for who knows WHAT reason, it was decided to follow through with it. Looking back on the pictures of that evening, you never saw such a group of sad and dour faced individuals. Of course, that also could have been on account of my mommy's and my dad's sides of the family not getting along all that well. (PARTY ON!)

Friends and neighbors had parties I and my brothers were invited to. They were always with the traditional party hats, cake and ice cream.

However, sometimes the gatherings just confused me.

There was this one "wing-ding" early on in my existence, which still lingers in my cerebral cortex that was given by the parents of a student in my first grade class.

Everybody really liked the kid. Unfortunately, with having severe cerebral palsy, he had difficulty walking and communicating. So, I suppose, not knowing who his friends were and as not to leave anyone out, his generous parents invited the entire class to his birthday party.

Even as a child-ling, I cringed at this prospect. Many of those kids didn't like me very much ... I suppose I was a bit too hyper-active for anyone's comfort level. And I certainly didn't want to be partying down with them in return. But, with the promise of ice cream and cake superseding my anxiety, I found myself walking into a houseful of my maligners.

What a HOUSE! Just entering it began my day of confusion. I had never seen anything like it in all my six years! It was an ultra-modern, mid-century masterpiece of glass walls and wood beams. From a set of double front doors, you walked DOWN into the living room on a "floating" stair way. I only knew houses that belonged on a farm or was a traditional box.

WHAT was this??!

My class consisted of about 25 children. The parents had a long table set up in the main room that could easily accommodate seating for every child!

My family always ate in the kitchen. The only real dining room I knew was at my Grammie and Pa's house. It was so small, you had to stand up to let somebody by you.

What WAS this??!

My apprehension was building.

Thank goodness the kids who really wanted me dead were seated at the faaaaaaar end of the table. They might as well have been seated in the next county, for all I saw of them.

Some comfort returned when hot dogs and hamburgers were served, followed by good ol' cake and ice cream.

But then something happened that blew my mind. We were all told to look under our plates. There was this weird looking scrap of paper. My prepubescent brain couldn't make any sense of what I was holding. It turned out, we each had a piece of a map which required the entire group to bring together like a puzzle.

Fun idea, right? Tell that to a pack of sugar-high first graders. After a whole lot of ensuing chaos, the parents must have realized the error of their best-laid plans. It was only after they stepped in with a lot of strained "Seeeeee?" and "Oh, it goes heeeere!" that it actually came together.

"It's a TREASURE MAP!!!"

I thought, "What the dookie is a treasure map?"

I stood there with that little half-smile I always wore when I didn't know what the heinie-bumper was going on.

“ohhh ... good ... a treasure map ...” (WHAT were we in for?)

Next thing I knew, we were being handed our coats. Thinking the party was over, I took mine and asked them to call my parents to take me home.

“Noooo, Stevie! The party’s not over! We’re going on a TREASURE HUNT!!!!”

It was then that I figured out this treasure map thing had something to do with what was about to occur. And it was taking us back outside.

Now, dear readers, I need to inform you ... it was early, early Spring. However, it had SNOWED the night before. Even though the sun was out on the day of the party and was melting the ground-cover, it was still COLD! Plus, the snow melt turned any exposed ground into swampland. We were all dressed for a party in our Sunday best; with no boots!

But, off we went, going pillar to post. Again, this is a mob of unharnessed six year olds. Nobody knew what was really going on; nor did we actually care. I remember the dad clutching the next “clue” wailing “It says here ...!” or “NO, THIS WAY!!!!”

You also have to remember that his sweet, poor son couldn’t really walk very well, so the entire time the father had to half-carry, half-drag him through the muck to participate in the “fun”.

After traipsing halfway to kingdom come, soaking our shoes and socks through with icy effluent, the last clue brought us back to the house. Filthy with mud, soggy from the melt and freezing cold, we all lumbered back into the house.

There, at our places, we found an assortment of gift bags full of chocolate coins and “pirate booty”

It then occurred to me that it would have made A LOT more sense if they had avoided exposing us to certain death and simply HANDED us the bags in the first place. However, I confess, the temptation of chocolate and the siren-song of hidden treasure distracted me from my unpleasant foray into the unknown.

However, my shoes were still soaking wet and my feet were blocks of ice.

In retrospect, I know these very nice people were so excited about giving us all a treat; doing it especially for their son. But, in spite of all their preparation, I’m not sure they thought through all the ramifications.

And ain’t that just like life?

(Uh oh, here it comes ... the predictable philosophic summing up ...)

No ... I will let you figure out the metaphor by yourselves.

However, I will say ... the important thing to remember is ... my feet are still cold.

Yet looking for birthday treasure,  
Pirate Steve

## Playing to Win

When you think of a card shark, what image comes to mind? A smoky, dimly lit saloon? A round table pushed to the side of the room with a single lamp dangling over it? The table strewn with poker chips and cigars? Men in disheveled clothes drinking hard whiskey around the table? Except one man in a black suit, with a black hat pulled down close to his squinty eyes, a cheroot in his mouth and a sneer on his lips?

You'd be wrong, wrong, WRONG!

In reality, your card shark would more likely be an amiable guy in his late eighties, in rumpled polyester clothes, slightly hunched, with mottled and weathered skin, and hard-to-move arthritic hands that have no difficulty skinning you alive in a friendly game of cards.

Believe me, I know from experience!

My darling Danny and I both grew up playing cards. As a matter of fact, one of my very earliest memories is walking up the hill to my Grammie's house and being caught in a rainstorm. My sweet Gram removed all my clothes for drying, toweled me off and wrapped a pair of her clean underwear around me, pinning it in place so as not to offend my 5 year old modesty. We, then, played "Go Fish" on her living room floor, eating her home made chocolate cookies and drinking Coke until my duds were dry.

In my family, we got together regularly with kith or kin. The adults would always go off into the kitchen to drink their highballs and play "Pinochle". We kids struck out to somebody's bedroom to play "War" or "Crazy Eights", making so much commotion an adult would need to break us up at least once in the evening. (I bet a highball or two would have calmed us down!)

Apparently, Danny's family played almost every night. His mother still does. Except, in his household, the kids got to play "Pinochle". In my world, "Pinochle" was strictly reserved for the grown-ups. I always thought there was something secretive about it, like some covert initiation you had to go through in order to attain full adulthood.

Anyway, we both loved playing cards ... and still do!

When we lived in DC, we had two separate groups of friends with whom we would get together. Of course, food was ALWAYS involved. Sometimes, I think, that was the motivating factor. (Gluttony is not a sin ... it is a way of life!)

One group of guys would rotate who would host and serve dinner before settling down for cut-throat "Jacks" or "Euchre" or "Oh, Hell". That was our gay group. Jimmy (who we always accused of cheating) had a deck of cards with pornographic photos of men from the 1970's on it. Even for us, that was gross. When we "lost" Steve to an out of

state move, we picked up Mark, the straight husband of a woman Danny worked with. Mark made us howl one night when he brought his own deck of cards with naked women on the flipside.

Fun times.

Then there was “The Beauty Box Gang”. I had to ask my friend Cindy to remind me where that name came from. She thought its source was her music director at church. He would always tell his choir to sing from their “beauty box”; a properly lowered larynx. She also suggested it might have come from the name of my poor father’s hair salon, “Everard’s Beauty Fair”, but I couldn’t confirm that. Anyway, “The Beauty Box Gang” consisted mostly of a bunch of our theatrical-type friends. My Danny didn’t perform, but he was definitely a supporter! Judy (our very talented friend living in Kansas City) always hosted. Her beau, Bill, the retired cop, was thrown into the mix as well. He was good for a quip or two at our expense. Judy is a GREAT cook, so we were even more motivated to get together ... starving actors and all that. Now, we didn’t always play cards, though. Sometimes someone would bring a game that was so confusing or annoying, we ended up vowing, next time, to go back to cards.

(By the way, once when Danny and I were in Chicago, visiting his cousin, we passed a hair salon called “The Beauty Box”. I took a picture for posterity.)

When Danny and I moved to Tucson, we thought we might try to keep up the “tradition”. Of course, that was difficult considering we only knew one person here. However, the Association we lived in had THIRTEEN “Bridge” clubs listed in its handbook, so we thought, “Hm! They must like “Bridge” down here.

We had tried learning “Bridge” in DC. One of our card guys brought over a table cloth which had the preliminary rules printed on it. I say “preliminary” because ... well ... do you have ANY idea how many rules it has and convoluted that game is? There are levels and contracts and alliances. It’s more like a conspiracy of Mafia thugs than a game for polite society! Anyway, we gave up.

But, being that we were now retired and have more leisure time to learn, we thought we would, once again, give it a go! A new acquaintance of ours (and local doyan of “Bridge”) was organizing a gathering of newbies and seasoned players nearby in order to help any new “kids” on the block become more familiar with the game. She had “lost” one of her couples and asked us to sit in. We said, “Sure!”. We were given preliminary instructions and the cards were dealt. Danny and I jibber-jabbered about our history with the game and the tablecloth and ...

“SHSHUSH!!!”

We were SHUSHED!!!

One of the other newbies at our table leaned over to us and very quietly said, "You're not supposed to talk."

WE'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO TALK????!?!? This is CARDS! You have FUN playing cards! You don't sit like zombies at a card table. There is chit-chat and laughter and animated conversation and frivolities and ... FUN!!!

"Shush" our heinie-butts! Good-bye "Bridge"!

However, if you WANT to play with some serious card game competitors, sit yourself down with anyone over eighty! You'll be game fodder before you realize it! Don't be fooled by their grandparently demeanors. They are SHARKS, I tell you. SHARKS! They WANT you to think they are feeble and harmless; that's their ploy ... BUT WATCH OUT! That eighty years of experience WILL be your downfall!

First there was Bob. Bob was the father of our friend Bonnie. (Danny and I bought Bob's house after he passed). Anyway, Bonnie, Bob, Danny and I went on a cruise together to Alaska. Bob shared a stateroom with Danny and I. Nice, nice man. WWII vet. At the time of the cruise, Bob was about to turn ninety. In the evenings, after dinner, the four of us would settle down in one of the lounges or game rooms with a cocktail or wine and play a friendly game of "Pinochle". (I was now an adult, so I was allowed to play). Bob would "skunk" us all almost every game. He mien would turn from a kindly old gentleman to a ruthless opponent. RUTHLESS!!! Every time he won, he would slam his cards to the table and "hee hee" in our faces. Every time, he turned into a twenty year old delinquent!

And then there was Merv. Merv was Danny's mom's husband after Danny's real dad died. Merv was a sweet guy. He also was a WWII vet, with many medals to prove it. (I guess it was that fighting spirit which followed him into any card game.) Danny and I, his younger sister, Dee and her husband, Dave, and sometimes his older sister Debi went to Florida every year to visit "Mom" and Merv. And again, every evening, after dinner, or sometimes after lunch, we would sit down together to play cards. The game of choice was usually "10 Up". It's a game of winning an initial bid by guessing how many "tricks" (or hands) you would take in order to lead that round. Merv would get EVERY lead by the strongest bid ... but he hardly EVER had any cards of worth in his HAND!!! And he ALWAYS won!! ALWAYS! We had no chance.

Experience, folks!

So, my point is, you need to watch out for the quiet ones or the sweet ones, especially if they are nearing ninety. They are tricky. They'll use their guise in order to play their cards.

"Hey, youngster! Wanna play a friendly gaaaame?"

You won't know what hit you ... truly. A victim of shark attack

## Here kitty, kitty (or doggy ...)

I am a cat person.

Of course, I know ALL about the tug-o'-war between dog and cat people over which is smarter, more affectionate, more attentive, attractive, appealing and all 'round better. Cat people claim dogs smell and are rather stupid. Dog people say cats are remote and are rather stupid.

But, what it really comes down to is, by nature, how much time, money and affection are you willing to spend on whichever is your preferred animal. If it is innately a cat or a dog, then who are we to argue about that natural fit? Right?

RIIIIIIGHT???

(Jeez, there are so many of you who are sooo hard to please ... just like a cat ... or a dog ... or a cat ... or a dog ... STOP IT!)

I grew up with cats, so my comfort level is with cats. With dogs, I have an inherent apathy. When some people get all oogly-googly about being with a canine, my first reaction is ... "meh". I don't dislike dogs. However, when faced with a slobbery tongue or a yappy disposition, I will gratuitously pat the animal on its head and utter an obligatory, "Nice doggy". I don't believe that makes me a bad person. Whacking an old lady; THAT makes me a bad person.

Although, I admit, my long suffering mother's parents had a dog that was kinda special. Her name was Puggy. She was a collie "mix". (I can only guess at the "mix" part. Is Heinz 57 a breed?)

Actually, Puggy first belonged to my mommy's sister Shirley and her husband Pete. But, with Pete in the military and constantly being transferred all over the place, Puggy went to live with Grammie and Pa.

She was a sweet, sweet dog. And very smart. I know EVERYBODY says their dog is smart, but she was truly amazing. I swear she completely understood English. If you were feeling blue or just needed someone to talk to, she would come over and sit, look in your eyes and listen. Every once in a while, she would react with a slow shaking of her head or a kind gesture of her paw on your hand. Like most "people", she had a favorite spot. But instead of a lounge chair in front of the television, it was outside, next to a basement window, in the shade of a huge oak tree. You could almost always find her there.

Puggy's Achilles heel was peas. She HATED peas. Grammie would put the leftover scraps from the day's dinner into her dog bowl. If there were peas present, Puggy would voraciously eat most every morsel of food, but, when she was done, the bottom of the dish would be lined with the peas.

She was a discerning dog.

My family had two cats; a tiger tabby named Ty Cobb and a black cat named ... what else ... Blackie. They were both tom cats and were allowed to come and go as they pleased. Talk about smart; when they wanted to go out, they would sit in front of the door and meow. If they wanted to come in, they would signal us by scratching the galvanized bottom of our outside screen door; the sound echoing through the house, even with the front door closed.

Because they were outdoor cats, sometimes they would disappear for a week or so. There was a time Blackie was even "off campus" for well over a month. We thought surely he was dead. However, when my dad's cousin Edie-Bop from New York City surprised us with a visit, we all screamed in unison when Blackie streaked through the open door when we were letting Edie in. Edie thought our hysteria was for her!

We loved Edie, but, at that moment, she was the ancillary arrival.

Oh, well.

Now, with both cats being toms, they were very territorial ... however, they did tolerate each other while they were in the house ... most of the time. But, there was many a night I was elevated a few feet off my bed and out of a sound sleep by the yooowling and screeching of a macho-on-macho power fight. Cats having at each other isn't the most pleasant experience especially at three o'clock in the morning.

(Makes you wonder why my animal of choice is cats, right?)

However, the trauma was balanced out because they were both so darn affectionate! ("Cutie kitty woogums!") Ty was a purr-baby. Plus Blackie had this quirk that endeared him to our little family group.

He LOVED doughnuts.

If you said, "Blackie! You want a cookie?" He would jump up from wherever he was and Indy 500 himself over to his food bowl. He knew a piece of doughnut would be waiting for him. I once put a piece of chicken and a slice of doughnut next to each other and called Blackie over in order to see what he would eat first. Of course, it was the doughnut. (He ate the chicken, too ... c'mon, he was a cat!)

My darling Danny is a dog person. His feeling for cats borders on complete humane annihilation. You can't blame him though. Besides being allergic to them, to him, growing up on a farm, cats are barn animals. They were devious and almost feral. He said there were many occasions at milking time, when he and his brother, Davey, would get tripped by the cats trying to get the boys to drop their pails of fresh milk. Not a good way to win "friends".

They did have a dog; actually LOTS of dogs. But it was always a white German shepherd they named King. So, with the passing of one from old age or having an

unfortunate farm mishap, the old King was replaced with a new King! Which gives true meaning to the phrase, “The King is dead. Long live the King!”

Clever and convenient.

After I left home, my parents actually got a dog. In reality, it was my older brother, John, who got the dog. However, when he got married and another dog became part of their household, the situation turned into “this house ain’t big enough for the both of them”, so Zeke went to live with mommy and daddy.

Zeke was a spectacular looking dog. He was tall and thin like a greyhound, had long, white, curly hair like a borzois, but had the face of a collie. And despite my preference for the feline persuasion, Zeke won my heart. He was verry kind and never barked. You could even say he was quite laid back.

He was another smart one as well. While Zeke was dozing, dad would put a treat in his food dish. Then my father would lay on the couch in the living room and say Zeke’s name. Zeke would dutifully get up, walk over and look at him, as if to say, “What is it father?” Dad would quietly say, “Look in your bowl”. Zeke would then jet power himself into the kitchen to get his reward. He understood what dad was saying.

If he was smaller and a cat, I would have taken him home with me.

But, I do confess, sometimes even a cat can be too smart for anyone’s good.

Especially, if it is a demon kitty.

In the late 1980’s, I was living in a studio apartment in a pre-war building in northern Manhattan, near where the George Washington bridge entered New York City. (For all you unworldly ‘uns, a pre-war building was built prior to WWII. As a result of not having to adhere to wartime restrictions, they have thick walls, large rooms and lots of parquet floors.)

A friend of mine named Doug had a roomy one bedroom apartment one floor below me. (I had two friends in New York City named Doug ... this was “uptown Doug”).

Doug had a cat.

I wish there was a better word for this feline other than just “cat”. Looking at him, he could be described as overly large, white, long-haired, aloof and extremely ARROGANT!

Oh, and, as I’ve indicated ... smart. Too smart. Calculating.

This animal was the type that needed you to know who was in charge ... and it had nothing to do with you.

One of his favorite ruses was to come over to you and demand to be petted. Then, as soon as you gave him a few affectionate strokes, he would rip your hand to shreds for the indignity of you daring to touch him.

Evil kitty.

You might think psychotic, but psychosis implies that he couldn't help himself. No ... he always knew what he was doing. Every move was carefully thought out in order to prove his power over you.

Doug was going out of town for a few days and asked me to see to his "kitty". Of course, this meant feeding the cat, putting water in his bowl and changing the litter box. Being that I knew what to do from my years of dealing with my own childhood cats, it was no big deal ... or so I thought.

Now, unfortunately, my schedule was a little wacky at the time. At one point, I found I could feed him the morning of one day, but couldn't come back until late on the following evening. This would leave the cat unattended for about 36 hours.

As I entered the apartment at around midnight on the second day, I could immediately tell something was amiss. When I stepped in, some foreign object crunched under my foot. When I turned on the foyer light to see what was what, all I saw was kitty kibble spread over the entire foyer floor. Interspersed with the kibble were shreds of toilet paper.

The cat had not only spread hard cat food and toilet paper all over the floor of the entrance, it had dispersed the stuff over the ENTIRE apartment. And it was a LARGE apartment.

No. Room. Was. Spared.

As I went from room to room, I suddenly noticed the Evil One watching me. He waited until I met his eyes and then he slowly began to clean himself, as if to say, "Leave me alone that long ... you get what you deserve."

A chill went down my spine.

But then I got to thinking, WHERE did he get so much kibble???

Walking into the kitchen and, in light of what had happened to the rest of the apartment, seeing the disaster in front of me was no surprise. The real surprise came with the shock of discovery of what this brilliantly criminal mind had done.

In order to get to where the kibble was stored, he had jumped up onto the kitchen counter, then made a precarious leap onto the top of the refrigerator. There, he had opened the cabinet door above the fridge and knocked, not one, but two bags of kibble onto the kitchen floor. That meant, he had to move the unopened second bag from the the back of the cabinet to the open door and then over the top of the refrigerator in order to get it to fall. Then it was just a matter of shredding both bags and playing kibble hockey.

Mean ... mean ... mean ... and conniving ...

And EVIL!

Thank goodness one bad apple doesn't spoil the whole bunch. There are too many "goodgy, woodgy, pretty kitty" pussy-cats out there that are wonderful companions. Am I right? (Purrrr!)

That said, long ago, Danny and I decided that we were not going to have any pets. His eschewal of felines and my indifference to canines made for an easy decision. In addition, for many years, we were both so busy, we always felt it would be unfair to the poor animal sitting alone for far too many hours.

But, I also knew from past experience, when you least suspect it, your four legged bosom buddy could rapidly turn into your worst nightmare. And I just wasn't willing to take that chance.

And besides ... there is territory to consider ...

I am the pet.

Meow!

Rumpleteazer

## Star Gazing

“Star gazing!”

Now, I know what you’re thinking: “Oh, here we go again with ANOTHER tedious episode of name dropping and all ‘round fawning.” But guess what? You’d be WRONG!

The stars I’m talkin’ about here are the little pin-prick lights in the celestial dome we see in the evening sky which we human beans have been gazing at since the dawn of beankind or, at least, since the invention of the moon pie. I’m referring to the “looking up” kind of star gazing.

I have always loved looking at the night sky. I guess I got that from my poor father. I remember very early on in my kidlinghood, dad dragging us away from “The Flintstones” on television to look at Venus or The Big Dipper. At first, it didn’t stir a whole lot of excitement in my little loins. “Yabba dabba doo!” seemed a lot more important to me. But, after a while, it clicked in my wee head that what I was staring at was a whole bunch more significant than what our home’s aluminum foiled t.v. antennae was showing me.

And, personally, I grew to love it,

Yes, the daytime sky was swell; blue firmament, bright Sun, fluffy clouds, birdies flying; but it was somewhat limited in its offering. On the other hand, the heavens at night had mysteries of other galaxies! The veil was lifted when the sun went down and the cosmos was my oyster! The lights in the inky black set me up for solving the enigma of the universe.

Or something like that.

Actually, when I was young, I was happy simply figuring out where the Big Dipper and The Pleiades were. And they were easy to see. Being we were in the foothills between the Catskill and Adirondack Mountains circa 1960ish, there really wasn’t that much light pollution. I could stare for hours and not feel I missed anything. That was until my hyperactivity kicked in and had to run off to see what Earthbound “sparkling thing” would next grab my attention.

However, I can recall being rather confused by my first visit to a planetarium. This occurred near my home in Schenectady. I was probably around seven years old. Our school class was going on a field trip. We were told we were “gonna see stars”. I thought the adults had been drinking the kool-aid because it was in the middle of the day. (They couldn’t fool me!) However, as I sat in the dark, tilted back in my chair, looking at just about nothing, I was completely unprepared for the wonders that soon appeared before my prepubescent vision. What to my wondering eyes should appear,

but ... STARS ... and CONSTELLATIONS ... and even the MILKY WAY! “Yabba dabba doo!”

(How come nobody ever told me about this??)

Early lesson: I didn’t know everything.

Oh, well.

When I moved to New York City, I missed being able to see the stars. Although, gratefully, my final apartment was three blocks from the Hayden Planetarium in the Museum of Natural History. I say “gratefully” because, with all the smog, tall buildings and constant light, the only stars I would have otherwise seen were the ones on Broadway.

As I got older, I learned more and more of the positions of the planets and the names of some of the major stars. However, smug as I got about my star knowledge, I should have known, cockiness would always lead to “come-back-and-bite-me-in-my-heinie”-ness.

My nephew, Jeffrey from New Jersey, came to Tucson in order to visit my darling Danny, dad and I. We were going to spend an evening’s outing at the space observatories at the top of Mt. Lemmon near us. However, due to the threat of monsoon rain, the telescope folks canceled the tour. Instead, our friend, Bonnie, invited us over to her house to have a look at the sky. Bonnie lives on a hill, overlooking a golf course only a few blocks from our house. As a result, she has a great view of the open sky.

Oh! I have to take a moment to tell you about something unique in the area where we live. Our community of SaddleBrooke is at the base of the mountain where the space telescopes are. As per an agreement with the developer, there are absolutely no street lights in the association, nor in any of the neighboring communities. If you have house lights, they need to be low wattage and be turned off by ten pm. That way, it reduces the light pollution, making it a better environment for the observatories. As a result, it is DARK here at night; unnerving, but all the better to see what the sky offers.

Anyway, we were all on Bonnie’s patio oohing and aahing at the clear night. (Naturally, the fickle monsoon rains had never appeared ... figures.)

Being from New Jersey and having hardly ever left home, Jeffrey had never seen the Milky Way; there had always been too much light interference. But the Milky Way was clear as night that evening. (Considering the subject matter, saying “clear as day” seems somehow inappropriate, don’t you think?)

Dad and I, then got real confident about showing off our prowess for knowing the star chart.

“There’s the Big Dipper.”

“I think that’s the Big Dipper.”

“Yes, that’s the Big Dipper because there’s the Little Dipper ... I think.”

We went on like this for a while as we got the group looking at the “Big Dipper.” That is, until Danny, standing behind us, said, “Uh, guys ... turn around. Isn’t THAT the Big Dipper?”

We did as instructed to see him pointing to the sky in the complete opposite direction from where we had convinced everyone was the “Big Dipper”. He had found the real constellation ... it was VERY obvious!

We all howled.

Again ... Oh, well.

(Thank you, Danny.)

Talk about clear skies, our cabin in West Virginia had crystal clear viewing for sky watching. I suppose it was because we were on the top of a mountain. That and the fact there wasn’t a trace of civilization for miles around. But, in this case, for me, I found myself not so much looking at stars and planets, but looking for U.F.O.s. There was a couple of fellas just a few cabins away from us that swore they saw them all the time. As a matter of fact, these guys had been featured in a documentary about visitations involving mysterious sightings.

I MAY, maybe, sort-a, might have seen one. But that, most likely, was more a matter of desire than reality.

As I’ve said before ... oh, well.

But there WAS an extraterrestrial experience that really did happen which, to this day, has been burned into the folds of my brain. And this happened a WHOLE lot closer to Mother Earth.

Near my house in Schenectady, there was an elementary school with an enormous school yard. All the neighborhood kids considered it their own property by regularly taking advantage of the baseball diamonds, playground equipment and open spaces. This was especially evident during the summer.

It was in the mid 1960’s.

This one summer night, most of the kids were playing kickball on the diamond nearest the road because it had the best light. My friend, Jay, and I had decided we weren’t going to get involved with the gang that night. We were having more fun throwing sticks in the air and watching bats chase them. (Mature entertainment, to be sure!)

We were about 500 yards from the kickball game and slightly around the corner of the school building. We could hear the game going on, but couldn’t see it. All at once, every child on that ball diamond SCREAMED!

In the second it took us to react, a meteor flew over our heads!! It couldn’t have been more than 200 feet off the ground. It ROARED past us like a jet engine! It was so

close, you could feel the heat from its flames as it burned in the atmosphere of our playground. It roiled like the fire from a burning tire.

We, in turn, SCREAMED as it's tail shot past!

We watched it disappear over the low trees and hedges near the far fence of the school yard. We couldn't see it, but it smash landed in the farm field just on the other side of those hedges and broke into several pieces. The fire department had to be called to put out the grass fire it had started.

A piece of that meteorite is now in the Smithsonian in Washington, DC.

It certainly was a once-in-lifetime experience!

On that one night, in my young life, I experienced the Heavens and the Earth joining up and becoming one.

And that, perhaps, is why I have such a affinity for the night sky. Maybe it's because, on that rare evening, I realized that the stardust up there is the same stardust here on Earth. And, actually, is the same stardust we are all made of.

When I am looking up, I am not peering into the unknown. What I really am looking at is something much more familiar: the stuff that dreams are made of.

And U.F.O.s.

My stardust memory,  
Ziggy

## Mid-Century Modern

When anyone with a modicum of awareness of style and taste (which, of course, ALL of you possess), think of mid-century modern, what usually comes to mind is glass walls, blanched wood accents and low-slung furniture looking like something out of an IKEA catalogue. (Oh, those Swedes!)

Whenever I find an image of it floating in the forefront of my little pea-brain, I get the sense that I am standing inside a fishbowl, inside a museum with people looking at me, while I am looking at them, as they look at the furnishings, as I look at the furnishings ... and we are all thinking, "How interesting."

But, to moi, it all has the warmth of a newly opened package of baloney.

Not that I am saying mid-century modern styling is a lot of baloney. No! Don't be putting that word sandwich in my mouth! I am just saying that the cutting-edge, sleek approach of this innovative design, while fascinating, can leave one feeling a bit ... well ... cold.

Unless, of course, you are Rob and Laura Petrie, living in suburban New Rochelle and the interior of your mid-century modern home was put together by professional set designers. Then, you've got a case for some warm and fuzzy feelings. But, then again, "The Dick Van Dyke Show" was pure fiction as was their interior decoration, which gets me back to my original point: the genre is a bit removed from reality.

Look, I'm not saying that ALL streamlined stylings are frigid. I'm a huge fan of the Arts and Crafts movement. The Arts and Crafts people took all the curlicues and gee-gaws and doo-dads from the Victorian Era and reduced them down to a shelf, a board and some varnish. But, boy, did the masters of that trend make some snappy furniture. And, because they used natural materials (in my humble opinion) it has depth and warmth.

But getting back to mid-century modern design.

It has a HUGE following. Some of my best friends have lived in classic modern homes which were built just after WWII. For example, two ol' pals of mine lived in an area just across the river from DC called Hollin Hills. It was designed specifically as one of the first "mo-dern" developments in the area. Their house had mostly glass exterior walls and not a lot of interior walls to boot. (Thank goodness, the bathroom remained "private".) It was a truly contemporary and innovative building.

But I was always FREEEEEEZING when we visited there. FREEEEZING! Glass exterior walls ain't good for insulation.

So, you see, the genre's lack of practicality (not to mention HEAT) doesn't help make me a big fan.

However, I have also learned, through the years, that folks have their own version of what they think is mid-century modern; especially if those folks are on the Italian side of my family.

For example, there was my Auntie Julia. Julia was my poor father's aunt, sister to his father. Auntie Julia stood about four foot, eight inches tall, but had the personality of a WWE wrestler ON camera. She talked like one, too. Her gravelly voice was lower than most men's. She had pitch black dyed hair set in a bouffant with bangs. (I suppose that was to "add height".) She had black penciled eyebrows, RED lips, RED cheeks with RED finger and toe nails to match. Like Laura Petrie, she always wore Capri pants, however, she somehow never quite lived up to matching Laura's girlishness. Maybe because it was the Pall Mall cigarette that was continually dangling from the corner of her mouth that tainted the image. I always imagined the reason it never fell off was because the RED lipstick that was smeared on the cigarette butt had adhered itself to the RED lipstick on her lips.

(I am sorry, but it's true! Or, as the folks in the South would say, "Bless her heart!")

Auntie Julia furnished her living room with the highest quality modern furniture money could buy. It was completely white with gold accents and a high grade white wall-to-wall carpet to "bring" it all together. However, Auntie Julia's living room was the Area 51 of her house. NOBODY got in there! It might just as well have had barbed wire at the door and a "KEEP OUT" sign painted in RED to match her lipstick. And to MAKE SURE nothing was sullied, the entire room was covered in fitted plastic. Even the rug had a clear plastic tarp over it. It seemed as though an ice storm had, one day, blown into her living room and covered her possessions with an impermeable clear crust.

I know friends who have spoken of their family members who have had plastic on their furniture and what an icky, sweaty feeling it was to sit on it, especially in the summer. Well, I wouldn't know, because I NEVER GOT INTO THE ROOM!

Anyway ...

And then there was Uncle Johnny and Aunt Betty. Johnny was my dad's cigar smoking brother. And, although Betty wasn't Italian by birth, she certainly was by association; at least in her modern decor tastes.

Now, I have to hand it to Betty. With what means they had, she really tried to create a truly mid-century home. But, unfortunately, it turned out a little less modern and a little more kitsch. However, to my child's eyes, it was GREAT!

Walking in through the back door (you always walked in through the back door), the first thing you saw in their back porch was a huge door to a BOMB SHELTER. Come ooon! How much more 1950's can you get than having your own bomb shelter? However, to my deep regret, I was never able to wheedle my way into it.

Anyway, you, then, came into a smallish kitchen with the obligatory Formica kitchen table in turquoise with matching chairs. And, of course, the table was set with a matching Sambo and Aunt Jemima salt 'n' pepper shakers. As a matter of fact, Aunt Betty had a penchant for salt 'n' pepper shakers as there were about 100,000 spread throughout their kitchen.

But ... the living room was truly special. It was a curious child's dream! It was as though Barnum's Museum of Curiosities had been projected from the past into my aunt's and uncle's abode.

First, I will say, Betty gave it her all. They had painted the walls a turquoise blue; perhaps as a nod to the kitchen table you had just passed. Except, there was an accent wall painted in a "burnt" orange on which a wrought iron musical staff had been hung. The staff itself was curvaceous as though it was dancing out the music. It was my understanding the notes on it were the opening tones of the song "Chiri Biri Bim".

Unlike Auntie Julia's house, you were able to walk into the living room. The first thing that met you was a huge L-shaped sectional sofa, also in turquoise. But, LIKE Auntie Julia's living room, it was covered in plastic. EVERYTHING was covered in plastic. Even the lamp shades were wrapped in plastic.

WHAT was it about plastic? I suppose both families had a dread of small children coming in to sully their possessions. (Now why would they think that?) However, I'll choose to think that both Auntie Julia and Uncle Johnny were such disagreeably, abundant smokers, maybe they were concerned about ashes on the furniture. Yes. That is what I will believe.

As you moved into the room, you had to stay on the clear plastic runners that protected the equally turquoise rug. Naturally, they had the de rigeur velvet paintings of various mandarins and scenes of the Far East on the walls. No modern room would be complete without them!

I remember there were two black and gold striped wing-backed chairs (wrapped in plastic), both having overly large dolls with crocheted hats and dresses planted squarely in the middle of each seat daring you to try to usurp their territory. Now that I think of it, Aunt Betty had an affinity for crocheted items. The room seemed to be filled with bottles and urns and tissue boxes all smothered in crocheting of various colors. However, there was one bottle with no covering that I was forbidden to touch. It stood on the floor next to the television/hi-fi console and was about as tall as I was. It was filled with coins. I could only imagine the millions of dollars in there. But my memory has it that they were more concerned about me breaking it than stealing any of its contents. I wonder why I had such a reputation?

The only time that bottle of plenty was moved was at Christmastime. That was when and where they placed their silver aluminum tree with the matching turquoise

Christmas ornaments and the red, blue and yellow electric color wheel to shine on it. (Red, blue and yellow ... the colors of Christmas.)

But the piece de resistance of the whole decor ... the thing that made it truly up-to-date and chic ... was the stuffed baby alligator lounging on top of the back cushions of their sectional sofa. It was about two feet long and had yellow glass eyes. Talk about being fascinated! I could NOT get over that it was even there! I loved imagining Uncle Johnny swamp wrestling it into submission. Actually, I think they had picked it up in a souvenir shop in Florida. But it didn't matter WHERE they got it; it was more important to me that it was even THERE! So special; so wonderful!

So MODERN!

Yes, my relatives really had some kind of sense of style, especially when it came to their own tastes and interpretations. And, looking back on it, if it made them happy, who am I to seemingly judge? (By the way, I have not been judging. I have been reflecting.)

So, the next time you are thinking of updating your abode and are considering giving it some truly retro mid-century modern touches, remember: you'll need to feel cold, so get rid of your furnace. Choose a room nobody can never, ever walk into. Plastic on your furniture is a must-have. And certainly ... for the perfect finish, don't forget the stuffed alligator!

And if you need a consultant, most of them are dead. You're on your own.

Style is what you make of it!

Eero Saarinen

## Instrumental knowledge

As I believe I may have mentioned sometime, somewhere in my past graffiti, my family is quite musical.

(Now. There is a historic linguistic reference to the usage of the word “musical” to surreptitiously refer to someone who is “gay”; as in “Is he musical?”. But, I can assure you, it doesn’t apply to my clan ..... oh, wait ...)

Yes, we all garnered delight from enjoying the dulcet tones emitting from the hifi or radio. My poor father liked Beethoven and Mozart, my long-suffering mother mostly liked country music or movie sound tracks, brothers John and Michael doted on the dulcet tones of heavy metal and I had mania for The Beatles. (For me, the theatre stuff would come later).

However, our primary way of artistically expressing ourselves was through singing. (The caveat being that some Cupos sang better than others.)

That said, over the years, musical instruments occasionally appeared out of nowhere, influencing our methods of expression.

John dabbled a couple of times. In middle school, I remember him suddenly with drum sticks in hand pounding on a raised, rubberized piece of wood. In a rare truce from sibling rivalry, we even had an ersatz band rehearsal or two with a couple of our neighborhood pals. John was on his pad and the rest of us on our air guitars; all the time dreaming of fame and fortune. However, when our dreams were dashed with the realization that none of us could actually play anything, the band “broke up”. And THAT was the extent of his drumming career.

He also had a trumpet for a short time. However, except for one or two unfortunate times, I can’t recall him diligently practicing on it. I suppose after a few attempts with a horn, you either commit or run away screaming. He chose the latter.

My dad’s dad, between hair styling and barbering, played the mandolin. He had a small combo that played on early radio. He also belonged to an all guitar/mandolin/banjo orchestra (called a plectrum orchestra) ... but more on that later.

It still bugs my father that his own dad’s mandolin disappeared somewhere into the abyss of family inheritance miasma. Per dad’s prodding, I, once, tried to retrieve it for him. Sadly, the suspected party involved was unresponsive to my inquiries. That mandolin must have been worth something, to ignore an old man’s request! (To be clear, the old man I refer to is my father, not me! Snark!)

I don’t recall dad ever playing anything. However, my mother played piano. THAT said, I’m not sure HOW her parents payed for her lessons. They really didn’t have

much moola during the Depression, yet there was little Ruthie taking piano lessons. And, now that I think of it, they didn't have a piano either!

Let's jump to conclusions, shall we? Her father was a carpenter. Her mother was a great baker. And she had an aunt with some means that she was close to. Maybe between barter, loans and pity, her lessons were made possible. Who knows? But where did she practice? Speculation number two: she was active at church and at school. Maaaaybe one or both institutions allowed her some keyboard time.

(Hmmm. I will need to pick the brains of her sisters, my Aunt Shirley and Aunt Lee in order to figger this out.)

Anyways, by the time I entered the picture she was quite adept. She even served as music director for our church for a time.

Although, I know she always wanted a piano of her own.

In the 1960's, our local Safeway (yes, grocery store) began selling furniture. I remember we actually bought a low-slung, mid-century modern sofa (WHAT???) to replace the maroon, horsehair Victorian era settee my dad's mother "pity-gave" to us. (This is where plastic covering would have been a welcome relief ... Lordy, I hated that scratchy horsehair monstrosity ... even MORE than that flimsy excuse for a couch. At least I could SIT on the new couch without fear of getting a rash!)

One year, Safeway, surprisingly, put a piano on display for sale. It was a Wurlitzer spinet piano made of a pale shade of oak. And, yes, it was THAT Wurlitzer of organ fame. However, this particular keyboard was a bit more compact than the three hundred pipe church organ Bach liked to finger.

Not exactly having the Vanderbilt fortune at hand, my mommy couldn't outright afford it. BUT, at the time, Safeway had this GREAT plan where they accepted S&H Green Stamps.

For you uninitiated, S&H Green Stamps were doled out at many grocery and department stores, as well as other places of enterprise such as gas stations. The number of stamps you received was based on how much money you spent at the cash register. (For a family with three growing boys, money was spent!) After receiving your allotment of stamps from the cashier, you would dutifully paste them into little booklets that had previously been dispensed to you. After you accumulated a certain number of stamps, you were eligible to redeem them for food or household products. A catalogue was published showing you what items were available and, depending on how ambitious you were, how many stamps it would take to acquire said desired product.

Well, my fastidious mommy, had already been saving up bundles of stamp-filled books when the piano appeared at the store. I remember them being neatly piled in and around our telephone nook. (... along with the coupons she saved from her menthol cigarette cartons.)

Sure enough, she ended up “BUYING” that piano with her piles of S&H Green Stamp booklets!!! She had accumulated just enough stamps to buy that floor model we had been looking at for weeks.

Can you imagine?? Leave it to my mother!

As an aside here ... I ended up with the piano. My mother felt, since she didn't play it anymore and didn't want to “donate” it to the local landfill, the obvious choice for acquisition would be me and my darling Danny because of my career and Danny's musical background. However, my parents were still living in Schenectady while Danny and I were in DC. So, we took the train up, rented a truck and backed it across their lawn to the front porch. By thankful coincidence, the floor of the truck was practically the same level as the floor of their stoop. We just wheeled the piano out of the house, into the truck, secured it down and off we went. When we got to DC, two muscle-ly friends of ours helped us wheel/wheel/work it down the front steps to our finished basement. It took some maneuvering, but we eventually got it down there and into position. (Thank goodness our friends were there for “inspiration”!) Between learning music for my theatre jobs and church and Danny playing it for pleasure, we used it A LOT! We finally donated it to our church when we left for Tucson. It had been well-loved.

However, the whole time we owned it and in spite of being delighted to finally have a piano, I still didn't know how to play it. I had learned music theory in high school and college and could plunk out notes with the best of them. But, through my entire life, I had always longed for lessons.

Although, in fourth grade, for some reason, I somehow talked myself into learning recorder. (Practically the same thing!) My fourth grade teacher. Mr. MacKenzie, loved the recorder and would even occasionally bring it in and play for us. He offered to give free lessons at recess to any kid who was interested. I suppose, in order to avoid my usual public humiliation on the playground, I volunteered. After making the commitment, however, I found it somewhat ... meh. There wasn't a lot of drama involved in recorder music. The closest thing I got to drama was trying to get my teeny pinky finger to stretch down enough to cover the last two holes at the end of the apparatus. I found it was reeeally difficult to get sound out of the thing while I was grunting with effort.

However, I maintained my desire to play the piano. Before my mother made her S&H Green Stamp coup, we were keyboard-less. There was a really dilapidated, out-of-tune relic in a “summer house” on the property of our friends, the Wintergersts, on which I would gratuitously play “Chopsticks”.

However, I felt I needed something more satisfying.

So after dropping many hints for, at least, some piano lessons, in or around age nine, my parents finally surprised me with ...

... a guitar!

I was SO baffled and bewildered, I remember my hyperactive self being stunned inert and speechless. Of course, the speechless part was on the external me. The internal me was babbling “A GUITAR??? Who asked for a guitar?? Where’s my piano lessons??? What were you THINKING???”

But, nice child (and future actor) that I was, I just smiled my half-smile and slurred a polite, “Thank you.”

The instrument was a Suzuki “classical” style guitar. That meant it had a wider neck than a usual guitar. Little hands; wide neck ... not a good match. Thankfully it had nylon strings so I didn’t rip my fingertips apart in an effort to make music.

Apparently, unbeknownst to me, the plan was to take me to guitar lessons once a week to be taught by an old friend of my father’s family. And when I say “old”, I mean that literally.

His name was Stephen St. John. He was the almost same generation as my dad’s parents, but a few years older. Back in the day, after my father’s grandmother died, his widower grandfather married Stephen’s widowed mother. As a result, we were related by death (or something like that.)

Stephen was an amazingly accomplished musician in his heyday ... which was heyday-ing loong before my heyday ever came around. It was Stephen’s plectrum orchestra that my grandfather occasionally played with.

So, okay ... I was going to go take guitar lessons once a week with a relative I had never heard of, in, what turned out, was a really terrible neighborhood in downtown Schenectady. When I realized WHERE my weekly travels would be taking me, I knew it was exactly the place where I would meet my young demise.

I resigned myself to my fate.

Toward the end of summer, on a hot day, the day of my first lesson arrived. My father drove me to the Hamilton Hill ‘hood. We stopped in front of a rather run-down row-house with a sagging front porch. I looked at my father as if to say, “Are you SURE this is where you want to take me to die?”

We walked up the shaky front steps and through a sticky door on the right side of the porch. Creaking open my portal of doom, I looked up a lightless stairway lined with inky black wainscoting. There was some dim natural light coming through a glass pane in the door at the top of the stairs.

Clutching my unfamiliar guitar for some kind of desperate security and walking up those even creakier steps, I felt a rising dread.

When we reached the door at the top of our climb, we were faced with lettering that looked like something out of a film noir movie. But, instead of a private detective’s

name painted on the corrugated glass, we were faced with a “Stephen St. John” in peeling paint.

Opening the door, we came into an open room that was completely frozen in time. I liken it to Charles Dickens’ Miss Havisham; a bride who was jilted on her wedding day and was so traumatized by it, and in spite of the passing years, she never changed a thing ... with the hope her bridegroom would someday return and restore her honor.

This room was that “bride” waiting for the good times to return.

The walls were covered from floor to ceiling with the same greasy, dark wainscoting as was on the stairwell. The only light was that which peered in through the dusty windows. This room, obviously had, once, been a vibrant office filled with the comings and goings of many music students. There were small rehearsal rooms with partially glassed doors just off the main room. We were surrounded by several pictures and awards in frames hanging throughout, touting the accomplishments of Mr. St. John. The walls were lined with wooden chairs, waiting to be filled by anxious students. There was a large wooden “magazine rack” near the top of the stairs. Only, instead of periodicals, it held crumbling sheet music and lesson books.

And everything ... everything was from the 1920’s; covered with the dust and decay of all those passing years.

I was horrified and fascinated.

Without warning, one of the many lesson room doors opened to reveal a bright angel of light to dispel the darkness. She was an incongruous figure in the form of a woman in her approximate 40’s with a bleached bouffant hairdo, a light blouse, slacks and a nice smile. (“WHERE did SHE come from???”) She was Jean St. John, Stephen’s daughter. She would be the person teaching me the basics, after which, I would be passed on to the master himself.

After she introduced herself, I looked at my father who said, “Well, I’ll see you in an hour!”, turned on his heel and went out the detective agency door.

I was alone.

Still in shock, I looked apprehensively at Jean, fearful to move lest I would get any of the decay smutched on me. But she just led me into one of the cleaner lesson rooms, closed the door and off we went! The light coming through the window in that cubby, along with Jean’s good nature, brightened my spirits and allayed my trepidation.

When we finished and came back out into the main room where my father had returned and was waiting, I became aware of some movement in one of the other lesson rooms. Jean said, “Let me introduce you to my father.” And, just as quickly, opened the small room’s door to reveal “Mr. Havisham” himself.

Stephen was approaching his 80's at the time. He was slightly stooped and a bit cigarette stained. His hair and clothes were just a little disheveled and needed washing. He was wearing suspenders with matching pants. Still seated, he looked at me and, with the authority of someone who made his living from precision and respect, wryly said, "I hope you learn your lessons, boy. Practice, practice, practice. You better be pretty good by the time I get you. Or else."

Thinking it was time to RUN, I respectfully said my thanks and good-byes and practically pushed my father down the stairs.

I took lessons from Stephen and Jean for almost six years. And, even at that age, through fear or love, I practiced an hour every day. In spite of his age, Stephen was a great teacher and a true task-master. It was the only time I saw him truly "come alive". The best part, however, was, as we got to know each other, we both relaxed in each other's company and came to be friends.

From that experience, I learned discipline and passion. I came to recognize and respect talent in others and, because of their influence, in myself. Because of my time with a guitar, I ended up using that surprising gift from my elders on many occasions, in many a performance.

I, also, learned not to judge a book by its cover. People aren't always going to be what you THINK they are based on your first impression. Give them time. And, in this case, even if time and circumstance seemed frozen.

Don't be afraid of the unknown. It may just end up being something quite familiar.

Plus, who knows? You might end up making beautiful music together.

With a song (and a chord) in my heart,  
Mr. Music

## O.C.D. (Overwrought Cleaning Disposition)

As I have been contemplating what is important to me these days, I have NOT found myself dwelling on politics, climate change or the social injustices happening in our current world circumstances.

No.

I have been obsessed with thoughts of cleaning.

Now, let me be perfectly clear ... it is mostly only in THOUGHT that I am washing down my house and not so much in DOING the actual deed.

Although, I did just spend the last four days vacuuming and washing my screened-in porch so that my darling Danny and I could actually sit out there.

We live in the desert. And although it is a nice desert as deserts go, everything eventually gets covered with desert dirt. This happens when the winds blow and the Southwest version of Mommy Nature begins trying to take back her territory. However, for the summer, in order to appease her, lest she completely buries us in sand dunes or burn us up with heat or flame, we decided to let her have her way. It was too hot to sit out there anyway.

But now that it is a comfy 85 degrees in the evening, it was time to ease her out like an unwanted in-law and, once again, take control of our property. Which brings me back to thinking about my task.

You see, I have never been one to jump right into anything. I have always been that kind of person who needs to look at something from this angle, then that angle and then maybe formulate a plan about what I MIGHT do to tackle the project at hand. This is usually followed by some additional consideration on how it could or should be done. I have known to muse about something for YEARS before ever taking any action.

My friend, Steve Parker, once asked me to make a bedspread for him out of some fabric he had. Luckily, being that I can sew, I readily agreed. However, it took me almost two years before I even started the thing. I eventually finished it and we both were both quite happy with the results. Thank goodness he didn't need it in too much of a hurry. There wasn't any kind of impending important social event happening in his bedroom.

And thank goodness he didn't pressure me; putting me under some kind of time restraint. It would have taken me even longer to get at it if he did! I don't work well under pressure. I sort-a freeze up. And not in a fear or anxiety way. Nope. I just tune out and turn off. I have no real reason why that happens. The reality is the more pressure I feel, the farther away I drift from the task. It's almost as if my psyche is a wet grape. If you pinch me wrong, I will fly off the table and slip under the stove, where you will never be able get me.

Something like that.

Anyway, back to thinking about cleaning.

Besides my need to overthink and having timetable issues, I am fraught with obsessive compulsivity. I have a tendency to want anything I do to be absolute perfection. Which causes me to hesitate even starting a venture juuuust in case it might be done incorrectly. Which, in order to make sure it is executed right, causes me to think about it more. Which, in turn, puts pressure on getting the thing done and causes me to drift away.

(Are you getting all this?)

THANKFULLY, I am keenly aware of this template in my superego and, in my vast maturity, have made great strides in attempting to break the pattern.

I have learned to force myself to make the plunge and actually take action. Of course, this will mess with my inner anxieties, but I know I can calm myself in the actual doing of the deed.

You see, the other part of being somewhat obsessive, is you become immersed in the minutiae of what you are undertaking. There is comfort in seeing to the details. It is sort of like the Zen state of mind one discovers when doing a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle depicting the Sistine Chapel.

Although, that “attention to detail” can work against me.

One summer in the early 80's, when I was still living in New York City, I took over for a friend who was cleaning apartments for a living when he went away to do summer theatre. This was an unfortunate gesture on my part because, with each apartment, all my eccentricities kicked in. It would take me HOURS of thought and labor just to do one room. Each visit, I would lose a whole day in some stranger's apartment. I couldn't tear myself away if something looked even a bit sullied. Apparently the customers were thrilled. I later heard they were a bit disappointed when he returned and took over again. But I was glad to be done with it. It left me physically and mentally exhausted!

Which gets me back to my tale of spending four days cleaning my veranda.

I certainly didn't spend four 24 hour periods on my hands and knees slaving over a hot bucket. Of course not. But I did take a few hours each day to carefully, attentively, delicately, deliberately attend to one quarter then one quarter then one quarter then one quarter of the space until it was spotlessly clean. Naturally, I devised a logical step-by-step method. By simply attending to one part of the porch each day, I would only need to move the furniture in that section only twice; once to move it off the part of floor in question and once to move it back.

Now I MAY have spent a bit more time than I needed engrossed on a smudge or two ... or three. And I needed a nap each day when I was finished. But the result was marvelous!

Plus, who was I bothering? Danny, LONG ago, learned that this was my modus operandi. And, even though HE was able to pack up, move and unpack two houses, wash all the clothes, put them away and have all the pictures hung on the walls in one day, he was used to my ways ... most of the time.

There are situations where he will spontaneously jump into something, wanting my immediate participation. When we were first together, I would sweat and babble in panic. Now, I just swallow hard and focus on carrying out the thing. As they say, "A bird in the hand saves nine." (That's how the old saying goes, right?)

Anyway, now that the porch is done, I need to begin thinking about cleaning the rest of the house.

Danny has offered to share in the cleaning of assigned rooms once he retires at the end of December. But then, it's easier if all the floors in the house are vacuumed and mopped at once. But we need to dust first just in case anything falls on the floor. Who's going to dust? Do we do it by assigned rooms or as one whole enterprise? And who is going to tackle the bathrooms? Danny doesn't really care if the toilets are cleaned. Maybe I will do the toilets if Danny does the showers. But what if he doesn't wash everything the way I like. Maybe I should just do it all myself. But that's a lot of work. However, if I wait until Christmas, the house will be filthy. Until then, perhaps I'll do it room by room myself.

Or maybe I will think about it a little longer. Yes! That's it.

I'll just think about it.

In deep reflection,  
The cleanest cleaning lady

## Birthday suits

Now that I am a month passed my 66th birthday, for some crazy reason, my thoughts began to free associate phrases containing the word “birthday”. (That’s how my mind functions, so work with me here.)

“Birthday card”.

“Birthday cake”.

“Birthday candles”.

“Birthday suit”.

The first three are ephemeral. Cards are swell, but you read them once and eventually toss them when they get covered in dust or food; depending on where you leave them. Cakes get eaten. And, at 66 years old, candles are simply a fire hazard.

But birthday suits ... now THERE’S something you can sink your teeth into (figuratively speaking).

I was trying to remember the first time I took a bite from the Forbidden Fruit and became aware of my own nakedness.

It was in Sunday nursery school. I couldn’t have been more than four years old. A boy in my class and I both needed to relieve ourselves at the same time. The harried parent who was trying to teach the class some Bible lesson using paper and school paste (the kind you liked to eat) couldn’t manage to escort us, so she told us to go together. Even at that age, I felt a little weird sharing a loo with someone who was not in my family. But the kid seemed very enthusiastic, so I went along with the concept. As we both unzipped our pants and “made water”, he could not stop talking about the color of our separate streams nor did he refrain from comparing our appendages. At first, I had NO idea why he was making such a fuss. However, his fervor was making me very uncomfortable. It was at that moment, the scales fell from my eyes and I suddenly became self-aware. It dawned on me that our private parts were probably supposed to be private for a reason. My body parts were NOT up for discussion. Even at that tender age, I intuited that comparisons were quite *déclassé*.

Now, that said, only a year or two later, if any one of my peers asked me to pull down my pants, I would do it at the drop of a belt buckle. However, that was only my instinct to entertain emerging and not necessarily the act of a child desperate for attention. (Or so “he” says.) Thankfully, I quickly grew out of that stage. That was probably because, in a fit of foreshadowing, I figured if someone wanted me to entertain them, they were going to need to buy a ticket.

I was a pre-pubescent nine year old the first time I saw an adult male fully exposed.

Lake George Village is in the Adirondack Mountains about an hour and a half drive from my home in Schenectady. The Village is at the southern tip of the lake. There is a large man-made beach with shower and bathroom facilities next to the beach. My family had just finished a wonderful day swimming and playing in the water. However, as we were all covered in sand, my mother told us to shower off before we got in the car. My dad took us into the men's facilities. We were keeping our bathing suits on as we rinsed off the sand. But when we entered the shower room, what to my wondering eyes should appear but a naked man. Never had I seen such a thing (so to speak). It was difficult not to look away. To me, it was fascinating and horrifying all at the same time. However, something inside of me knew I would be going to hell if I didn't avert my eyes. So I did. But I peeked. I recall I almost asked my father about it, but then had the alarming realization that he probably looked the same way without his clothes. I was NOT ready for that conversation. So I obsessed in silence; wondering if that was what was in store for me.

Eeeeeeeek!

However, I was even more shocked the first time I saw a body part or two of the opposite sex.

I was probably around thirteen.

There was a private club near where I lived called The Ponderosa. Even though it was a membership-only facility, once a week, they would open their pool to the general public. I was there one summer day with my dad, my brothers and a couple of neighborhood friends. A kid I knew from middle school was also there with his family. His older sister was swimming around in the pool. I knew of her. She was one of the "cool" girls in high school.

Anyway, just as I was easing myself into the pool, she was getting out. She wore a bikini appropriate for a teenager, but was very revealing to my young eyes. I watched her as she padded over to her family. She dried her face with her towel, took a drink of her soda and quickly jumped, feet first, back into the pool. When she came up to the surface, we were only a few feet apart, facing each other. Unbeknownst to her, yet VERY evident to me, the surface water tension had pushed her bra up to her neck. Thus I was offered a face full of teenage bubbies. I was stunned and speechless. What could I say?? "Excuse me, your breasts are in my face." Not on your life! She was one of the "cool" girls, for Pete's sake!

So I did what any boy that age would do. I sunk to the bottom of the pool. When I started to blackout from lack of air and couldn't stay under any longer, I slowly rose, just exposing my eyes and nose like a crocodile trying to stay cloaked when searching for prey. Thank goodness she had discovered her "situation" and restored her modesty.

But, darn it ... she kept doing the same thing over and over again. She would get out of the pool, wipe her face, drink her soda, jump back in and visually torment me!

On the fourth round, I had had enough. I got out of the water and wandered over to the baby's pool, where I belonged.

Even so, when I look back on it, I confess, it makes me tee-hee that I was so shocked. Ever since I was a little one, my long-suffering mother would come home from a long shift as an operating room nurse and immediately take a shower and don a nightgown and housecoat. During the winter months, the outfit was all flannel. But in the humid upstate New York summers, with no air conditioning, everything was sheer. I had been viewing my mother's "stuff" for YEARS, but I somehow never associated my maternal eyeful with the one I had at The Ponderosa swimming pool that summer's day. I guess in my young mind, my mother was just "my mother" and not a person of the opposite sex.

But, then came a time, I had to face my own public nudity.

In 1977, when I was nearly as post-pubescent as I was ever going to be, I was cast in a ten-year anniversary celebratory tour of the musical "Hair". There are great songs that come from the show such as "Aquarius" and "Let the Sun Shine In". Most folks would know (or, if you don't, you will now), the characters of "Hair" are hippies. "Hair" had become, oh so, infamous in it's original Broadway run with its unabashed, full out on stage nudity. The "naked" part was based on an actual Love-In that happened in Central Park in New York City in the late 1960's where people took their clothes off in public to celebrate the human body, nature and love.

I was playing the role of Woof. That character is usually portrayed as a very free spirit. Even though the director of our tour told us we all did not have to take our clothes off, he and I both decided the character of Woof would be one who'd have no hesitation in disrobing.

Woof might have had no trouble, but Steven was freaked out!

Eeeeeek!

The nudie scene in question came at the end of the first act. During the scene, we were to chant while moving into a circle dance, all the while, taking off our clothes. At the very closing of the ensuing song, the cast turned to face the audience and held hands. We, then, raised our arms in unison and sang the final word, "power".

We had rehearsed it for a couple of weeks, miming the removal of what we would be wearing in the actual performance; in my case, it was a kaftan. Eventually, the dreaded hour arrived. We were in a rehearsal room with bright lights and open windows. There was not going to be anything subtle or hidden on THAT day. Time came and I dropped my kaftan. I promptly burst into tears. Apparently my days of unabashedly pulling my pants down on request were long past. This was something

primal that cut me to my fragile quick. I kept on performing, still weeping. Moving in the circle dance, I not-so-subtly tried to recover my virtue by dragging the kaftan over my frontal parts, attempting to make it look like it was something my character would do.

It didn't work. Later that day, the director told me to leave the kaftan where it fell. Sigh.

Well, the more we repeated the scene, the less I wept. That was probably because I came to realize that once we began to form the circle, on one side of me was a gorgeous well-formed actress and on the other side was a well-endowed, muscular African American actor. With my afro and skinny, pale body, I looked like a Q-tip. NOBODY would be looking at me.

Or so I thought.

There were two times I remember hyper-ventilating with regard to my over-exposure.

The first was when my beloved Grammie came to see the show. ("MY GRAMMIE WAS GOING TO SEE ME NAKED!!!") She had heard about "Hair" and was willing to make the four hour drive to Rochester, New York where we were playing at the time. She wanted to see what it was all about. Well, she certainly did see what was what. Thankfully, her comment was that she liked the singing and that the lighting was too dark to see "anything".

I loved my Grammie. And I loved her even more for her discretion. I still hyper-ventilated that she was there.

The other time was when one of my very best friends from college, Leslie, also came to see the show in Rochester. The show went on as usual and we received an enthusiastic reception. Afterward, I asked Leslie what she thought of the nude scene. She also said it was too dark to really see anything ... except ...

Leslie said, when we all sang "power", it was still too dark to make out the bodies. However, there was a small spotlight coming from somewhere that shown directly on my naked crotch.

That's when I REALLY hyper-ventilated.

The entire rest of the run, I always briefly glanced down as we were getting into our final position in order to make sure that mystery light was not "featuring" me. THAT kind of attention, I didn't need!

These days, the only hyper-ventilating I do is when I try for an overly lengthy ride on my stationary bike. Long ago, I gave up being concerned about my naked body. Once I passed into my sixties, except for a fleeting glance by my darling Danny and the three or four doctors I visit every few months, nobody was EVER again going to see my bare

butt. So because I am now the only person viewing my privates, any kind of modesty becomes inconsequential.

Still, I wonder what would happen if I tried to walk around in the house in my God given birthday suit. Perhaps it would be a celebration of the human body after all.

No, it would just frighten the neighbors.

With unfettered thoughts,

Woof

## Testing the waters

So, it's obvious my family relied on water fun for our main pastime in the summer. In upstate New York, that would be two and a half months, to be exact. At least it was when I was growing up in the Fifties and Sixties; long before global warming turned up the thermostat a notch or five.

It was bitter cold from mid-September to May, a half a month of spring weather in June, two and a half months of sweltering humidity in the summer and finished off with about half a month of a beautiful red, yellow and orange hued autumn. Then we would suddenly be plunged back into the depths of winter.

However, before those freezing depths were plunged, in the hot days, we did plenty of our own plunging ... into any water we could find.

Back in the years of we Neanderthal people, almost nobody had air conditioning. Oh, the families with certain means would be lucky enough to have a unit in their bedroom window. However, it only serviced the room where the parents slept. Their kids were generally left sweating like the rest of us peasants.

Most of the "normal" folks I knew sweltered through with large box fans strategically placed throughout their homes. It was done in such a way so that wherever you knew you were going to plant yourself for any length of time ... whether at the dinner table, watching t.v. or in bed ... there would be air moving across your dripping body.

But it really didn't do any good. You still SWEAT like a ... well, whatever metaphor you want to sweat to.

The only respite was to hurtle oneself into a cool lake, pool or swamp; whichever was most handy.

Thus, very early on, I began my love affair with water.

I can remember, before I even knew how to swim, loving being in the water. So much so that I really enjoyed almost going to a watery grave.

Just north of where I lived in Schenectady, in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, was a reservoir called Sacandaga Lake. Many a campsite and cabin was built along its shores. My Aunt Shirley's sister-in-law had a "camp" there (as they called summer cabins in those parts). Well, one great day when I was about four, Aunt Shirley and my Uncle Pete, took me, my brother John and her mother (my Grammie) up to the camp to enjoy the water and the weather. (I don't remember why my parents weren't there ... they were probably working.)

I remember we were all on a small beach near the foot of the cabin. We were taking turns going in and out of the water. However, it was made clear to us we needed

to be careful, because the sand that had been poured into the water to create our oasis only went so far. If you bobbed out too distant, the bottom would drop out from under you and you would find yourself dog-paddling back to higher ground. That is, if you KNEW how to dog-paddle.

For most of the afternoon, I had been under the watchful eye of my Grammie. I was allowed to wade up to my knees and play in the sand. However, my brother John had been allowed to go farther out into the water, tossing a beach ball around with some kids we didn't know. I wanted to play catch with the ball as well. Dutifully, I asked my Grammie if I could play with them. She warily relented, with the caveat that I "don't go out too far." And, "Stay where I can see you."

So I splashed my little butt over near to John and asked him to throw me the ball. He did. However, being that he was just a little tyke himself, his hand to eye coordination wasn't yet that great and he threw it so that it sailed over my head. I turned around and waded to my left to retrieve the ball and ...

I abruptly found myself under the water. But, I wasn't frightened. I was remarkably calm. I remember being fascinated with suddenly being in a whole different world. I swore I could see fish swimming nearby. It was so interesting. That was until I realized I was having trouble breathing.

Just at that moment, my Grammie landed on top of me. She had seen me go under and leapt to save me. The problem was, she couldn't swim either. Now we both were going down for the count. The next thing I knew, I was being dragged by the waistband of my bathing suit back to the beach. My Aunt Shirley has seen BOTH of us disappear and became our life saver. My poor Grammie was shaking like a leaf, Shirley was exasperated and, in spite of being reprimanded, I was completed unfazed. I just smiled and went back to playing in the sand. I loved the water too much to let a little thing like death prevent my enjoyment. Although after that, they wouldn't let me go in it for the rest of the day. That was okay with me. It was wonderful just to be in the proximity.

My poor father tried to teach me to swim by doing the "dad thing" and throwing me mercilessly into whatever pool or swimming hole we were visiting at the time. But, being the exacting child that I was, I was more annoyed at him for NOT teaching me the basics than his barbaric gesture of sink or swim. I always sank from indignation.

So then my parents decided to send me to take free swimming lessons at a local pool in a public park a few miles from our house. I was all for the idea. Finally I would be given the respectful treatment I craved and learn to swim properly. Unfortunately, that too was a pipe dream. When I took my first jump into the pool, I found I was too short to stand with my nose above the water. Even though I was standing on my tippy-toes, I suddenly found myself asphyxiating. I was quickly rescued and abruptly sent away.

Apparently my undoing was some stupid policy of “needing to be able to stand in the water without drowning”.

Hmph.

THANK GOODNESS our best friends, the Wintergersts, decided to get a three foot, above the ground, set-it-up-yourself swimming pool. I could stand up in the thing and not have pool water going up my sinuses! The three Wintergerst kids (Peter, Pam and Linda) and we three Cupo boys (John, Steven and Michael) spent HOURS in that thing! HOURS! So much, that many more body parts, other than our fingers and toes, turned prune.

Sometimes we would be joined by Kendall Pirro, but his family had their own above ground pool. At first, the Cupo kids were allowed to play in that one for a short while. That is, until my brother John threw up in it, just after Mrs. Pirro had finished cleaning and refilling it. After that, we were persona non grata.

We loved our pals the Wintergersts. And we loved that they loved having us enjoy their pool with them. My favorite thing was to have all the kids grab a blow up toy and push them in front of us while we circled the circumference just inside the pool walls. We could get such a vigorous whirlpool going, we couldn't turn around to move against the rushing water. All we could do was jump on the toy and swirl around until momentum and friction slowed the current. Loved that.

Peter liked to glue cherry bombs on his model battleships that he and his father had meticulously put together. He would light the fuse, gently push the doomed boat into the middle of the pool and watch it blow up. I admit I was a bit intrigued by the practice. But a little voice in my head always insisted that I “step away from the explosives”. The heck with the danger involved; he was sully the precious water.

However, despite all the fun we had, I STILL didn't know how to swim!

I did figure out how to flail and thrash enough to keep my head above the surface. There were so many places all around us for me to test out my approach. There was Collins Lake just off the Mohawk River in the neighboring town of Scotia. One of dad's hair customers (he was a stylist) had a private beach she would let us use. Dad would do her “do” while we splashed around far from the besmirched crowds. Plus there was the pool at Thatcher Park in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains. That was great because the pool was built on a cliff overlooking the Hudson Valley. I was willing to overcome my dread of heights in order to appreciate the view and bask in their splendid facilities. And, of course, we always loved visiting our relatives who lived close to Coney Island or Cape Cod.

But the actual technique of knowing how to properly swim remained elusive. It wasn't until I went to college did I fulfill my lifelong dream. That was thanks to the Physical Education requirement set up by the State University of New York. All students

had to take one period of Phys. Ed. per semester. If it hadn't been required, I would have NEVER even given the syllabus catalogue a passing glance. Contact sports and I were never the best of friends. Thankfully, upon my reluctant search for a tolerable class, I found myself staring at "Swimming 101". SWIMMING!! Sign me up!!!

At last!

Gratefully, they also offered enough "weinie" courses to allow me to accomplish all my prerequisites. Thus, I took two semesters of sword fighting, two of folk dancing(!), two of diving and, two semesters of wonderful swimming (not necessarily in that order).

So, at last, under the tutelage of someone who actually knew what they were doing, I, not only learned how to stroke and breathe, I learned all kinds of various types of swim options. I got particularly good at the backstroke. And, even though I was never going to be an Olympian, I, at last, found my happy place in the world of aquatics.

I still like to swim. The association where I live in Areezoner has several pools to choose from. The only difference between the good old days and now is, at my age, when I turn pruney from the water, I look no different than when I have been on dry land.

Everybody into the pool!

Steven Michael Phelps

## Non-Precious Stones

There is an old ad that declares, “Diamonds are forever.” You know what other mineralized crystal won’t go away?

Kidney stones.

They are a pain in my heinie-butt. (Well, maybe not in that exact placement, but you get the idea.)

I know I’ve written about other people’s woes regarding that cursed phenomenon, but now it is MY turn. Why have I shied away from writing about my own all-too-often, unwanted experiences? Maybe because it is not exactly a laugh-a-minute subject matter (Ya think??). Or maybe my subconscious has been telling me if I don’t point them out to anybody, they will just quietly fade away like a bad dream.

No such luck!

I tell you it is a family curse! I’m sure it is that idiotic genetics “thing” again at work. My mother’s mother had them. As did my mother and my older brother. I can’t roll away from it! (Stones roll ... get it?)

See what they have done to me??? They have driven me crazy(er). I’ve heard the unbelievable pain has been likened to the experience of childbirth. I can’t attest to any true comparison. My birthing days are long behind me. But I can confirm it ain’t no walk in the proverbial park. The distress is Biblical in proportion. I’ve always thought you had to be a martyr to endure that kind of pain. However, being that I haven’t seen any Papal edicts declaring my sainthood, I can’t understand why I have been “chosen” for the constant ordeal.

So what brings this to mind NOW? Well, it might possibly have something to do with me being in the operating room yesterday for the removal of them for the 4,000th time (perhaps a slight exaggeration). Oh lawdy, I have had so many procedures and surgeries and who KNOWS what else to get rid of the suckers, I really have lost count.

There is a Midieval operation called Lithotripsy, where the stones are smashed to smithereens by putting you to sleep, laying you out on an operating table fitted with a water mattress and passing sound waves through the water into your unsuspecting kidneys. Can you say, “long-term bruising”? I’ve had the darn thing done tooooo MANY times. Unfortunately, my body has gotten “wise” to the scheme. Now, when I go in for a Lithotripsy, the stones break up, but don’t move anywhere; leaving little “seeds” for even MORE kidney stones from which to grow!

It reminds me of the “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” segment of Disney’s “Fantasia”. Mickey Mouse (the apprentice) smashes up a broom he had brought to life because he

couldn't stop the broom from wreaking havoc. Afterward, all the splinters came to life and formed into a thousand more brooms and created a complete catastrophe.

Kind-a like that.

Then there was the time I have written about in the past, where even a good "smashing" couldn't help. I had a stone in my left kidney that was almost an INCH in diameter. ("Are you kidding???" ) So the doc had to slice 'n' dice it out of me. However, the wacky thing about surgeries these days is that they don't want to keep you overnight. The powers that be sent me home with a drainage bag sticking out of a hole in my back and a catheter hanging out of my hoo-hah! (Lovely.) The plan was to have them yanked out in a week! A WEEK! So, in order to cope with my new accoutrements, I got our hand truck out from our garage, hooked the two bags to the upper rung and wheeled my "companions" around the house with me wherever I went.

(Clever. Charming. Gross.)

Look, I know most of you reading these cranky words know one or six people who have suffered or still suffer from kidney stone torment. Even YOU yourself have "enjoyed" a bout or two of excruciating misery. Because of this, everybody has a homespun solution on how to avoid them. I've tried 'em all, trust me.

Currently, I put lemon juice in every glass of water I drink in order to acidify my "liquid discharge". Supposedly, this will dissolve the stones that are lying in wait. HAH! The only thing that seems to do is make my tap water lemony. I drink SO much these days, my profuse sweating is giving Niagara Falls a run for its money.

I've also changed my diet to avoid foods that are supposed to create kidney stones. GONE are berries and nuts of any kind! COME ON!!! Who decided that the joy of a ripe strawberry or yummy cashew is bad for you? The Marquis de Sade???

Although, speaking of whom ... I don't miss kale. Kale is just something everybody believes was "revived" by some New Age hipster to make us think we are eating healthy. But, in actuality, was an Old World SADIST who enjoyed seeing people suffering in disgust from chawing on the awful stuff.

However, my darling Danny has discovered a great treatment for getting rid of kidney stones. And it came about quite by accident.

Around the summer of 2010 (give or take a year) we were enjoying a lovely weekend at our mountaintop cabin in the remote wilds of West Virginia. I had spent the day on our roof, cleaning out our gutters in order to prepare for the coming inclement months. It was a very hot day and I macho-ly perspired a whole lot. We had eaten dinner and were settling down to watch a movie on DVD (remember those?).

Suddenly, I got the first sharp jab in my back, announcing my upcoming trip through agony-land. It quickly escalated to the point where I was having an out-of-body experience. I was in complete disbelief of how painful it was.

We were a good hour and a half's drive to the nearest hospital. Danny packed up everything we had brought for that weekend's pleasantries, while I alternated between pacing around in delirium and hanging my head in the john. (Another "happy" side-effect of passing a kidney stone). When we were ready to leave, he draped me over the back seat of our Jeep, because it was too painful to sit like a normal human being. To accommodate my "ralphing", he placed an empty, plastic water pitcher in my hand as a substitute for the loo and off we went. Now, our cabin was not anywhere near the main road. One needed to travel for miles on a rutted dirt and stone lane that wove down and up the hills. That road was incredibly bumpy. Being in the back, I was continually being jolted around. It was probably even more intense than if I had been sitting in the front seat. Compounding the situation, our Jeep was in bad alignment at the time, so that even when we reached smooth pavement, the car jiggled and vibrated more than it should have.

As we drove, I could actually feel the pain from the stone moving lower down my back. So much so, by the time we reached the exit to take us to the hospital, I told Danny to keep on driving to our home in DC. I figured, I had already lasted that long, I could bear it another hour or so to make it to the hospital near our home. However, just as we reached the Potomac River to cross into DC from Virginia, to my shock and delight, the stone popped into my bladder and the pain instantly vanished. When I told Danny what had happened, he asked if I wanted to go out to dinner and dancing. I demurred. I was ready for bed.

But, thanks to Dr. Danny and our jiggly car, many hours of torture turned into a scenic drive home ... at least for the last two miles.

Recently, a friend of mine told me of some legitimate research on the ridding of kidney stones using that very notion of vibration. Apparently, it was discovered that the best way to move a stone was to put the patient on one of those old, wooden, rickety rollercoasters that bang and rattle you around. It was found that even after a couple of runs, the crystal would quickly pass into the bladder's void and all would be right with the world.

So, I've decided, the next time I feel one of those dreaded attacks coming on, I am going to instruct Danny to drive me to the nearest amusement park; preferably one that is at the end of a long, rutted dirt road and has been around for a few years. There, I will board the most dangerously decrepit coaster I can find and take a good long joyride. Of course, I might die from the whole apparatus falling apart while I'm on it. But, either way, at least the pain will be gone.

Riding it out,  
Saint Steven

## When it rains ...

I have been blessed with a wonderful life. Looking back on the living situation at the beginning of my existence, I could not have never, EVER conceived being where I am today. The special people I have met and the incredible places I have seen continually put me in a grateful state of mind, thanking God for ALL the blessings that I have been so generously given!

I also give thanks for the blessings I receive by all the BAD times. That's because those are the situations where I can have the greatest opportunity to learn a life expanding lesson.

At the present, I am browsing through the "bad times" lesson handbook, hoping to find some kind of epiphany.

So far, I am still waiting.

Since last you heard from me, I have been in the hospital. I had written about my kidney stone procedure with humor and, what I thought at the time, the necessary amount of aplomb. But soon afterward, things turned ugly and, on Saturday, I had to take that dreaded trip to the E.R.

With this writing, my usual bombastic presentation is a bit muted. Right now, Celine Dion is sounding more like Tony Bennett. But, I want it to be known, I haven't lost my sense of optimism and irony; just some of my energy. At the present, my mojo feels no-go. What's the old saying? "My get up and go, got up and went."

So, with your indulgence, I'll give you the general lowdown of what is happening, then close up shop for the day.

After a long series of kidney stones and the previous year's discovery of a bladder tumor (which was excised), every three months I go in for an in-and-out-on-the-same-day cystoscopy (a scope up my petey) to check the lay of the land. This most recent time, however, was done in the operating room. It was because my urolo-guy wanted to do a bit more in depth poking around. He didn't find any new cancer, but he found two kidney stones taking up housekeeping in the scar tissue where the original tumor had been removed. After he evicted them and cased the joint, I was awakened and then sent on my way.

However, very soon things became ugly. My urine quickly turned redder and clottier. I began running a fever. Then I stopped being able to PEE. Nope. Nuttin'.

Emergency room, here I come.

Once I got to the E.R. and was admitted, there were a lot of hits and misses; more than I care to recount. But here are just a few that took the wind out of my sails and temporarily heightened my suspicion toward some aspects of modern medicine.

When I was in the E.R., they tried to put a special self-irrigating catheter into my male parts. However, the catheter was built for the Jolly Green Giant. By the time they gave up pushing, smashing and pulverizing my poor peony, I was not very jolly, a little green and had a giant amount of discomfort. WHAT were they thinking???

After I had been moved to a room of my own, it was decided I had a severe UTI (lingo for urinary tract infection). They wanted to try an antibiotic on me that I had never used before. For those of you who don't know me, I am a delicate flower. I am allergic to most EVERY medication known to man. But, much to my reluctance, they got me to agree to try it. It was infused through my I.V. tube. Fifteen minutes later, I was in a full-blown seizure-like fit. The only reason the docs said it wasn't a "real" seizure was because I remained conscious. Great! I was able to. "enjoy" my epilepsy first hand. The really crazy thing was while I was flopping around on the gurney like a fish out of water, they insisted on inserting a regular catheter in me! I remember the great irony of the evening was when the nurse said, "Try to relax".

(I truly regret that a snappy comeback somehow alluded me. Maybe it was the situation.)

The other "fun" thing was when they removed said catheter on Monday morning. I found myself, once again, unable to urinate. After I rang for the nurse to say I couldn't pee, I was told it was funny because "it was what most guys said". The humor was lost on me. She told me they usually waited SIX TO EIGHT hours before they suspect something is amiss. I know my body very well. SOMETHING WAS AMISS. From what I was sensing, something was blocking my urine's escape route. Gad, I was in awful discomfort and felt even worse when my body insisted on trying to urinate. The nurse said it was probably just tension and I needed to calm myself. About three hours into "trying to calm myself", Nurse Ratchet decided to offer me a Tylenol and Valium in order to get me to relax. After that, I was relaxed AND in pain.

Crazily, by wild coincidence, there was a teacher with two nursing students on the floor who just happened to be looking to find a patient who would volunteer to let them put in a CATHETER!!!! Come on!!!

My nurse innocently asked me if I would mind if they put a catheter in me. ("What? And not have the pleasure of waiting another FIVE hours of agony before this torture comes to an end???" ) I thought of ALL kinds of things I could have said to her, but I just quickly agreed and promptly splayed my naked genitalia to the world at large. PRAYING they would get to their lesson post haste, they eventually began. In spite of the exacting, painfully, agonizingly snail-paced methods being wisely doled out by the teacher, the deed was FINALLY being accomplished. And when it was in ...

... Relief!

I just read, the average bladder holds 300 to 400 mls during the day and 800 mls at night. They removed 900 mls from my tiny body. Not only that, they did a test that proved it had been a blockage that was preventing me from doing my business ... and NOT TENSION. You know what my floor nurse said? "I knew it was a blockage". I refrained from knocking her blockage off her shoulders.

Now ... I have to take a moment to say how many wonderful people HAVE helped me and how hard-working everybody is. Their intentions have always been to do the best for the patient (me). However, sometimes "the best" runs off the road and needs a tire change. I suppose that can happen to anyone.

So, here I still wait. I am on two intravenous antibiotics and am hooked up to a catheter. Before sending me home, the doctors are trying to figure out what oral antibiotic I can take to treat the UTI without sending me into septic shock (which, by the way, I had last year ... another story, maybe.) Also, the non-peeing issue still needs to be resolved.

Let's just assume all will go perfectly smoothly. Very soon, I will find myself at home in the arms of my darling Danny, sipping a nice glass of buttery Chardonnay, enjoying our lovely screened porch.

Hopefully, I won't awaken in horror to realize it was a Valium induced fever-dream brought on by the mechanizations of an overly assertive floor nurse.

Biding my time,  
Tiny Tim

## Follow up to “When it rains ...”

My dear friends:

First, I have to thank you all for your encouragement, good thoughts, heartfelt vibes and all ‘round support. I am overwhelmed. Your efforts really buoy me up! I am so grateful.

Well!

I am home. They sprung me from the joint at around 4:00 pm yesterday. With a prescription for an UNTESTED oral antibiotic in hand and a catheter in ... well, you know what it’s in ... Danny whisked me away. While we waited for the prescription to be ready, he treated me to a pot roast dinner ... drive-thru, take out, of course. It felt good to be normal.

However, BEFORE we left the hospital, when the discharging nurse was giving me my walking papers, he told me he had spoken to my urologist. It was decided that, because I had been through so much already, they would leave the catheter in. BUT, the urologist was adamant that I call his office right away in order to make an appointment with him next week, at which time he would remove the device and give me a full consultation.

I called.

Next week, my urologist is on vacation.

## Aiding and Abetting

So, we human beans ain't such a bad lot. I know it seems we are at each others' throats for the least little thing these days. One misplaced word by who KNOWS who and the world is coming to an end! Well, it COULD be worse; we could be in the middle of a plague ... oh, wait ...

But my point being, in spite of what the media (whichever media you listen to) is telling us and the powers that be taunt us with, we really are a good group.

Proof number one being all the enormous amount of people wanting to put together food banks, clothing drives, school necessities and, especially, medical supplies for those folks that seem to be wandering around in the dark. As a whole, we are a people filled with a generous spirit. And if we can't give our time or supplies, some sure are generous with their monetary donations. If you look through the cracks of doom and destruction we are being shown, it won't surprise you there is a five year old somewhere whose lemonade stand is drumming up thousands of dollars to be used for some worthy charity.

Now HOW can you say the triumph of the human heart ain't genuine to a five year old?

C'mon!

Although, it's true, some people ARE better at generosity than others. In times of need, there are folks that have an instinctual knee-jerk reaction of "I have to DO something". My darling Danny is one of those people. I have always said he was going to get me into Heaven. You see, my knee-jerk reaction has always been, "Gee, helping out seems like a good idea. Why didn't I think of that?" ... I confess, I'm not as altruistic as people might think I am. More times than not, it was Danny with the great idea and me implementing the enterprise. Danny gets the notion and I put it in motion. He says that's what is says in "the contract". I have yet to see "the contract", but if dragging me along for a good deed, I'm all in! I just wish he would sometimes let me give him SOME of the credit.

On the other hand, in my many forays into the unknowns of ill-health, I have been the fortunate beneficiary of many a helping hand. Even with this most recent incursion I went through, our neighbor across the street insisted on making us dinner on the day I came home from the hospital. She knew it was no easy feat considering the dietary restrictions from my "high maintenance" life style. Danny kept trying to dissuade her. However, after an overly long discussion, they landed on chicken and vegetables. Most people would have given up after two minutes of "no, not that ... can't

have it ... allergic ...". But not Mary K. Her generous resolve drove her. She is one of the good ones.

And there are A LOT of good ones!

In 1998, I was down for the count after surgery on my brain. People came out of the woodwork to help me! My friend Leon drove every day to check on me. He lived a good 35 minutes from my house and that was if the traffic was flowing well. There was Jane Pesci-Townsend who was teaching at a university nearby who would give up her lunchtime to bring me lunch. And then there was Stephen Carter-Hicks, Scott Whipple and Leslie Bixby who all gave up a week or two of their lives to come to DC from out of town to watch over me. I will ALWAYS be unimaginably grateful to them for sharing their strength and generosity with me.

That said, there are times one's guardian angel comes in the guise of a complete stranger.

Back in December of 1975, when I was in the midst of my senior year of college, I was preparing to go home for my Christmas break. My dear childhood friend, Marilynn Buehler, who was also attending college there, rented an off-campus house with me. Anyway, because Marilynn and I lived so close to each other in our home town of Schenectady, NY, we were taking the four and a half hour drive back together. The plan was for my mother to leave early from home and drive the long way in order to pick us up. We would pack up the car, have lunch and drive back all in one day. Granted, that was going to be quite a haul for my mother. So she decided to bring my 15 year old brother, Mike, along with her to keep her company.

The plan was going well with their arrival and the loading up of the car. However, just as we were finishing lunch, a few snow flakes began to fall. But we figured we were hearty "upstaters" and knew how to deal with a little snow.

Because my mother had driven there, it was decided I would take the wheel for the trip back.

As we got on the New York State Thruway, it suddenly began snowing a lot harder. As we travelled east toward Schenectady, we also hit areas where it was sleeting; not a good combination.

The first city you come to after my college town of Geneseo is Syracuse. Even though I was driving moderately slow, just before Syracuse, we hit a patch of ice and slid front first into a snow bank in a ditch in the median. Of course, there were no cell phones at the time, so it looked like we were stranded. However very soon afterward ... no more than fifteen minutes ... a tow truck drove up and offered to pull us out. They said they were cruising the highway looking for folks who were in the same situation we were. It didn't take them very long at all to hook us up and pull us back onto the roadway. They asked for twenty dollars and off they went.

And off we went ... thinking how lucky we were to have such good “bad luck”.

However, our good fortune ran out not 20 miles down the road. I hit what turned out to be black ice and lost control of the car. It simply drifted to the right on its own volition. A bridge support pylon stopped us in our tracks when we hit it just in front of our right tire. When we got out to assess the damage, we could barely stand because the roadway was so icy. “Skating” over to the damaged side of the car, we could see the headlight was gone and the front grill was badly bent. The tire itself was unrecognizable.

We all got back into the car and thought, “Now what?” It was agreed that we would take turns going out one at a time (except my mother) to flag down any help that came our way. Sure enough, on my brother’s watch, a tow truck stopped for us. When the driver looked at our crumpled front, he said he would need to tow it to the garage where he worked. It would be a better place for them to determine what needed to be done to repair it. He also told us he would drive us all to the nearest toll booth where there was a state troopers’ office. There we could call our families and have them come get us.

Then, as we were about to leave, in my excitement and relief, I, idiotically, locked the car keys in the car. Now he couldn’t tow us because the car was set in park. Patiently, he said he would now need to call in a flatbed truck to load up our car and carry it to the garage. However, he was still going to take us to the troopers’ office.

When we arrived, he came in with us in order to make sure we were able to call our families and we were comfortable. He also wanted to discuss an idea he had. He suggested one of us stay behind to deal with the car the next day. He would take that person to a motel nearby that night and pick them up in the morning to drive them to the garage. We were all stunned from his generosity.

Without suspicion or second thoughts, it was decided I would stay behind. My mother pushed all the cash she had into my hands. It was all of \$26.00.

By that time, my father had been called, so we knew my Uncle Pete (who had the heaviest vehicle they knew for driving in “weather”), my dad and Mr. Buehler, who didn’t know either of them, were on their way.

I waved my good-byes and off I went with this benevolent stranger. And in spite of ALL the work he still had to do that night, drove me, as promised, to a motel with the caveat he would pick me up a 7:30 the next morning. Before he left, he even came into the motel with me to make sure they had an available room!

I didn’t sleep very well in anticipation of not being there for his arrival, so, the next morning, I was downstairs in plenty of time.

But I still had to pay for the room. Miraculously, the desk clerk only charged me \$7.00; “special insider fee”, he said. I was surprised, but thankful. Now, that left me \$19.00.

Sure enough, the tow truck guy showed up as he said, with a coffee and cherry danish for me. I hadn’t eaten since lunch the day before, so I was so grateful for his thoughtfulness. What a nice guy!

Driving to the garage, he was upbeat and chatty, despite his telling me he had not gotten to bed until after 3:00 in the morning.

It was one of those beautiful, sunny, after-a-storm kind of mornings. The drive to the repair shop wasn’t very far, but allowed some enjoyment of the good weather. When we arrived, my car was still up on the flatbed truck. I could see the damage and felt lucky it wasn’t worse and no one was hurt.

Then, something I thought was unusual happened. He and another guy looked the car over and decided to do the repair while it was still on the truck. I was surprised when they told me it wouldn’t take long to fix. So, hot coffee in hand, I went into the waiting area. The next thing I knew, my friend was handing me the car keys and the car itself was on the ground. He told me they had a master key to that “make” of car and got in easily. They were able to pull the bent bumper off the wheel enough to get my spare on. Except for a little friction if the steering wheel was turned too far to the right, the spare was spinning freely and there didn’t seem to be any issues with the engine. He told me if I was careful, I could drive it home to Schenectady and have a full repair done closer to home.

I was SO thankful to this man ... and expressed myself profusely. But then, I remembered I needed to pay him. I surely didn’t have enough to cover the cost. I would need to ask for a bill in hopes that he trusted me to pay it when I got home.

I meekly asked him, “How much do I owe you?”

Surprisingly, he asked, “How much do you have”?

I showed him the \$19.00.

He quietly said, “With toll to Schenectady and the gas you’ll still need to get ...”

It cocked his head a bit, looked me straight in the eye and said, “That’ll be \$12.00”.

I was DUMBFOUNDED! \$12.00 for the special flatbed tow and the repair? Not to mention all the ferrying around he did for us ... how was this possible?? I asked him if he was sure. He said he was ... and shooed me on my way.

I never saw him again.

This incredible kindness from a complete stranger is just what I am getting at. I was the beneficiary of the kind of charity of which we are all capable.

I have also found charity comes in different forms. There was a time, I spontaneously helped someone (with the goading of a few others) that made a difference in their life and opened my eyes to something larger than my own world perception.

When I was in high school, I belonged to a small singing group that toured around the local area. One incredibly blustery, frigid night in late fall in the early 1970's, I was driving back from a performance in a neighboring town with a car full of other singers. My ability to "snag" the family car always put me in the position of being the main "ride" for many of my fellow classmates. As we drove down a dark stretch of road, we saw a figure of a young woman walking down the shoulder. She wasn't wearing a coat! With her thumb out, she was trying to hitch a ride. You could see how little she was wearing as the wind grabbed at her clothes, threatening to tear what meager protection she had off her. To make the situation even stranger, it was about ten o'clock at night. What was she doing out there in such a state?

As we started to pass her, some of the kids began encouraging me to pick her up. Even then, I had my "Gee that's a good idea. Why didn't I think of that?" moment. Of course, with the setting being so odd, I was a little cautious. But I could see she was freezing, so we all agreed to stop and pick her up.

Because the car was already jammed with kids, one of the girls in the front seat moved to the back and sat on somebody's lap. The hitchhiker warily got in the front seat. I could see she really wasn't that much older than us, but, as is said in an old aphorism, "she looked like she was rode hard and put away wet". Her overly bleached hair was in shambles from the wind and she was shaking from the cold.

I could tell she was suspicious of a car full of teenagers out joyriding in the middle of the night, so I quickly told her who we were and where we had just come from. She relaxed a little, but I could see her guard was still up. When I asked her what she was doing out on such a cold night, she stiffened a bit and said she needed to go to work.

I'm sure everyone in the car thought the same thing I did: "At ten o'clock at night??"

When I asked her where she needed to go, she just gave a vague answer of "Upper Broadway, in Schenectady". That was about ten miles away! However, I could go that way and get us all home within our curfew, so I told her it would be no problem.

Throughout the whole ride, she was oddly quiet and stand off-ish. She wasn't unpleasant, just not forthcoming. As we were all hyperactive teenagers, it was a huge contrast to how we communicated. I just thought she must have had something on her mind.

As we got to the top of the hill that demarked the area of Upper Broadway, she suddenly said I could drop her off anywhere. The whole car exploded with “No! No! It’s freezing out! We’ll take you to your door!”

As we drove a little farther, she started getting anxious and again said I should just leave her anywhere along the street. And again, we all “No,no-ed” her.

Finally she told me to stop; that “this was where she worked” . She quickly thanked us and fled out the car before we could say anything.

We were in the parking lot of the local strip joint which we also knew as a house of prostitution.

No wonder she was so reticent! She must have guessed we naive children would have freaked out if we knew what she did for a living (assuming that was her livelihood).

And, of course, we did freak out. Thank goodness she was no longer in the car. It would have been embarrassing to her and to us.

But, looking back, we innocents were there to help her in her time of need. And it really didn’t matter what she did for a living. We were able to help her in spite of ourselves. And thinking about it, I believe, even if we did know, we would have picked her up anyway.

In a way, the experience showed me at an early age not to judge people by who we might think they are. We are all on this ride together and the more we can help each other, without judgment, the better beans we are.

Neither rain nor snow nor sleet nor gloom of night should stop us from doing our best for others. Because, who knows? We actually might be the one needing the help.

Thinking of you,  
The semi-good Samaritan

## Sitting in Silence

Why is it so difficult for me to sit quietly?

Whenever I am in a situation that requires me to act like a grown-up and be still, my mind begins reeling into that “I’ve got to pay that bill” and “I wonder what I’m gonna have for lunch?” territory. It’s awful sometimes. Even though I may be enjoying what I am doing, I start getting a little anxious about what else I could be accomplishing.

It’s ridiculous!

That’s not to say I can’t be distracted into sitting still. If I find myself focusing on something that I can zero in on, like the Sunday New York Times crossword puzzle or some sort of repetitive task, such as adding endless columns of numbers, I do just fine. I immerse myself in the thick of it and don’t come up for air until it’s done. And when I do, I get a vague “where am I?” feeling; like Rip Van Winkle rising from a twenty-year sleep. (“What do you mean I missed the American Revolution?”). I, also, do well with television, movies and stage shows. With a diversion, such as mass entertainment, I can grow focused on something other than my laundry.

However, it only seems to be those instances of distraction that I am “the quiet man”. Otherwise, I get so antsy-pantsy, I sometimes need to have an actual conversation with myself:

- “Steven. Are you supposed to be giving someone your attention here?”
- “Yes, Steven. I need to be attentive and sit quietly.”
- “Are you?”
- “I’m pretending I am. Isn’t that enough?”

My restlessness isn’t confined to my brain, either. For some reason, I always feel the need to distract myself by involving any unfortunate person nearby. This behavior goes pretty far back.

I remember a time in the early 1960’s, when I was in second grade. We were all supposed to be having “rest time” with our heads lying peacefully on our desks. Well, I couldn’t possibly acquiesce to that request. I kept on chatting with those kids who were sitting nearest to me. And when they began ignoring me or began to become fearful of disobeying the teacher, I switched to the other side to another child deserving of my attention. My second grade teacher, Miss Snyder, was really a very nice person, but my hyperactivity really tested her patience. I recall her futile attempts to get me to settle down. Finally she told me, “If I [sic] wanted to talk so much, go talk to the wall.”

Big mistake.

Eager to comply with her “request”, I continued my discussion by introducing the cork board hanging near the corner I was standing in to the coat rack nearby. My ensuing conversation was, then, down the hall in the principal’s office.

When I was in high school, it was agony! The only way I would get through ANY lecture was to:

1) become focused on the task of taking copious, overly-detailed notes and  
nauseam; or

2) fall dead asleep.

There was never an in between state.

It took me a while to figure out the “problem” was with me. Not that I ever thought it WAS a “problem”.

However, it took a few life lessons in school to alter my behavior ... at least in the hallway. I was a bit of a slow learner, but I eventually discovered that “silence was golden” or, at most, a source of survival when it came to relating to kids a lot bigger and more hostile than me. Even though my restless brain kept me energized, I taught myself to create a cool, distracted demeanor. Keeping a low profile tended to keep the bullies at bay and was less painful on my body than continuing on in my usual restless way.

However, later in life, some loving encouragement did help lead to a behavioral change.

Thirty years ago, when my darling Danny and I began dating and spending significant lengths of time together, he discovered I could not sit quietly in a car. I obsessed about filling any “dead space” with conversation. It wasn’t a conscious decision, I just think it was due to the fact that, to me, stillness equaled disengagement. Danny, who is quite patient most of the time, finally (in the nicest way, of course) had to tell me to “shut up “. I think he said it something like, “Do you always need to talk all the time?”

Yikes! I WAS talking all the time! And I hate it when people talk ALL THE TIME! One of my biggest pet peeves is being with someone with whom I expect to carry on a conversation and, instead, end up listening to a monologue. AND I WAS THAT PERSON! It was then I became determined to be hyper-aware of any situation and respect another person’s space. However, it was difficult to process that I wasn’t as fascinating as I thought I was.

On the flip side, the great thing about having a restless mind is I never am bored. I always have something in my brain with which to entertain myself. With the myriad of lists of things to do swimming through my synapses, I have oodles of pastimes to choose from: “compile the tax records” or “learn that new song “ or “try to convert my Grammie’s pumpkin pie recipe to gluten-free and sugar-free” and on and on and on and ...

I do remember a time, though, when I really needed to have a discussion with myself because I was SO uncomfortable sitting quietly; unreasonably so.

Back in 1998, after a brain surgery to remove a tumor, I was bed ridden and was unable to do anything except listen to books on tape. I actually began feeling extremely guilty about doing nothing. It wasn't just my thoughts on overdrive, it was the icky feeling that I wasn't being productive. However, after beating myself up for a while, I had an epiphany. I realized, I WAS doing something; I was healing. ("Ohhhhhhhh!") From that moment on, I took the proactive stance of using what energy I had to lay quietly in order to make myself better. It took a brain tumor for me to learn that lesson! Talk about a slow-learner!

Nowadays, at least, in my adulthood, I have learned to create silence when there needs to be quiet time. I am actually proud of that. However, it doesn't mean I am simply sitting quietly; conversation is still going on in my head. I just pretend to give an air of peaceful contentment, when, more often than not, I am silently recounting the items I bought last time we went grocery shopping.

I recently decided to test myself by joining a group which explores meditative prayer. Whoo boy, that was a challenge! As we were supposed to sit in contemplative thought, I immediately began dwelling on the eye appointment I was going to later that day. It was time for another one of those self-discussions in order to get me back on track.

But then I had another epiphany! By sitting quietly, with my mind open and unoccupied, I found it is easier to hear "the voice of God". In other words, the less I worked, the easier the inspiration I was seeking came. I figured out it was kind-a like when I was laying in bed after that brain surgery. Being still isn't being inactive. It just is another way to bring about results.

However, let me assure you, as of yet, I haven't got it 100% down pat. The mind is a strange and extraordinary thing. I'm still a restless fella. However, I figure if I sit quietly on my screened in porch enough times, gazing out on the flora and fauna passing by, I can continue to train myself to find peace in the stillness of nature. And, considering the source, that's getting pretty close to God.

Trying not to disturb the peace,  
Siddhartha

## Movin' and a-groovin'!

On the other hand ...

... moving around isn't such a bad thing.

I know, I know. I just finished extolling the virtues of thinking peaceful thoughts in a hushed environment in order to attain nirvana of some kind. And I still say it is so! However, I have definitely found that healing is a two part occupation. The quiet part restores the mind and the spirit. But we human beans aren't made up of just ether and air. For the rebuilding of the physical part, we gotta MOVE!

As Olivia Newton-John sang in her 1981 smash hit single, "Physical":  
"Physical. Physical. Let's get physical." (I won't go on to the "Let me hear your body talk" part ...).

Long ago, I discovered, when I felt my worst, I would go disco dancing ... NO ... I got up and actually DID something to move my arms and legs. Even though I was feeling like CRAP, a few minutes of taking a walking tour around the living room actually made me feel better. Afterward, I may have felt too pooped to peep, but the sense of improvement was undeniable.

I made said discovery quite by accident. After my brain tumor surgery in 1998, I required days and days of quiet time in bed. But then, I needed to go to physical therapy in order to re-learn how to walk. Ya see, the docs had severed my balance nerve on the right side of my head, so I continually felt like I was really drunk on the deck of a boat on the ocean in the middle of a hurricane... and the gale force wind was blowing me hard from my left.

The docs had this "creative" therapy where they would put me in a wooden box that looked like a closet, having me face the back. Then the contraption would rock to and fro, frontward and backward and make me vomit. (Fun!)

But in spite of this and other sadistic tortures, they insisted I walk every day. HOW??? I couldn't stand up straight, much less, have the energy to even take three steps!

Well, that's when the Fates took over. And they were in the form of a generous friend named Stephen Carter-Hicks. Stephen had put his life on hold to come down from New York City to take care of me while Danny was at work. I am a teensy person. Stephen, at the time, was, at least three times larger than me; both in height and depth. (Although, these days, he is quite slim and lovelier.) I found if I pushed my waif-like self into Stephen's sturdy flesh, I could actually stand upright. Then, with our arms wrapped around each other, I could use him as the best "walker" ever. There was a private cemetery on a steep hill across from the end of my street in DC. Stephen would half drag

me over to its graveled lanes and we would take in the sights. At first, the grounds keeper we encountered was wary about us taking our strolls. But when I guilted him into taking pity on me because I was recovering from a "BRAIN TUMOR", he relented and allowed us our daily constitutionals. It became fun passing the time looking at all the property of the nice dead people.

Thanks to Stephen, THAT'S when I figured out that these sojourns actually made me feel better. Each time, I may have started out in a lousy state, but I always felt so much better after my therapeutic walks.

I guess that's why they call it physical therapy. ("Ohhhhhhhhhhh!").

But it was my darling Danny who reinforced the concept.

In 2006, when I had my second bout with the big "C" in my nether regions, I had to concurrently endure two months of chemo and almost four months of radiation therapy, five days a week, for one hour each day. I don't mind telling you, all those chemicals and radiation do their own version of disco dancing upon one's body. I was feeling low, baby, low.

However, around the same time, Danny and I had been planning to install a new sidewalk in our back yard from the house to the garage; about a length of 60 feet. Danny had dug out all the turf by hand in preparation for the installation of the stone. The plan was for me to lay 1 foot by 1 foot slate slabs three abreast the length of those 60 feet. But then I got sick. But Danny encouraged me to go ahead and order the materials (slate and sand) from Home Depot in case I was feeling well enough to lay a few. After the pallet of slate was delivered, I decided to take Danny's encouraging words to heart.

One day, the sun was shining and I wasn't feeling too awful. I got my gumption up, put on my gardening hat, gloves and Crocs and went out to face my task. I decided to begin at the house end of the walk. Dragging the bag of leveling sand over to that side of the yard just about did me in. However, I was able to manage to put down enough of a layer of the sand to install three slate squares. Only 59 more feet to go! I was completely exhausted, but oddly invigorated at the same time. After that, every day or so, if I could manage it, I would don my outdoor gear and place an adequate amount of leveling sand to accommodate three slate squares. And, little by little, after a few months, I healed my body by building our sidewalk.

Danny observed that most likely my activity helped move the toxins out of my body. Even though it was a little bit at a time, the movement and my intention of bringing the project to completion, brought me a wholeness that I might not have otherwise had.

Go figure!

To this day, if I have a headache or feel "stomachy", I do NOT lay down. I usually go to work for a bit in my cactus garden. Or rearrange some books or music. Or see to

any one of the other tasks my restless mind has got for me to do. And I almost always do feel better.

So, to be clear, I am not negating everything that I scribbled about in my last entry. There is invariably a yin and a yang in all our lives. I crave the quiet time for my brain, but need the physical moment for my body. It's all just a means to the same end: feeling healthier by doing good things for yourself.

Now if I could just include an endless supply of gluten-free/sugar-free coconut cream pie without getting ill, life would be perfect.

In search of nirvana,  
Your Intrepid Explorer

## The Land of Bad Ideas

There have been times in my life (and I am SURE in yours, as well) where I have made a decision about something ... anything ... that I look back on and say to myself, "Hoo Boy! WHAT was I thinking?". I am mortified to admit, these instances happened way more frequently than I care to remember. Oh, I realize everybody has taken that short journey to a place where "it seemed like a good idea at the time", but quickly turned into a scene with you mentally clicking your heels together with an "Oh, Auntie Em ... there's no place like home!" like at the end of "The Wizard of Oz".

Making a bad decision doesn't need to entail a life-changing preference involving job, city or mate. For some people, it can be as simple as a really bad choice of haircut. Back in the day, most anyone of a certain sensibility who got a "shag" cut, or worse, a "mullet", always regretted it. Or, there were (and still are) many a bad perm situation out there. In these cases, the good thing is the disaster on your head will eventually grow out or (as in my case) disappear entirely. THANK GOODNESS for the passage of time.

That is, unless you decide to have your senior picture taken with a lamentable decision front and center ... indelibly marked for all eternity.

Which is what I did for my college senior yearbook picture in 1976. I, somehow, got it in my head that my naturally curly hair was going to be front and center. Looking at me now, who knew I possessed thick poodle curls. And, even though I rarely wore my hair in an Afro at the time, I chose to have a perfectly round halo of curlicues frame my face for that picture. I also decided to eschew the traditional coat and tie and wore a turtleneck sweater with a white cowl neck sweater over top of it. I must have thought I was the height of 1970's chic. However, being that I only weighed 110 pounds when I graduated college, that hair and TWO sweaters made it look like they were wearing me instead of the other way around. Observing that shot today always makes me want to reenact a scene from "Fahrenheit 451"; find every yearbook from SUNY Geneseo 1976 and build a bonfire ... a LARGE bonfire.

But ... what can ya do? What's done is done. Chalk it up to another bad idea.

And speaking of sweaters on sweaters, bad decisions happen a lot with folks' choice of clothing. Heck, a short trip to any Walmart to observe the hordes proves that point any day. A difficulty happens, however, when the person in question doesn't KNOW it is a bad judgment call. Then, all you can do is squeeze past them in the aisle, shaking your head.

Keep in mind, throughout your life, the concept of "fashion as a fad" will invariably lead to regret down the road.

Back in the mid-1980's, I had an outfit that I was SO proud of that took me a lo-o-ong time to realize it wasn't so glorious.

There was a noted designer at the time, named Willi Smith, who decided to make clothes that the masses could afford. Well, being the urbane consumer that I was, I went for it. I bought a pair of "M.C. Hammer style" baggy pants with a high waistline, dropped crotch and was fitted at the ankles. These stylish togs had vertical stripes of sea-foam green and beige. In retrospect, they made me look like I was wearing a circus tent. I had a matching sea-foam green rayon shirt and a skinny sea-foam green bow tie to complete the ensemble. Oooo, I thought I looked cute! I wore it all through the Eighties and, unfortunately, even into the Nineties. Thank GOODNESS the only picture I have of me with the ensemble was taken from the shoulders up. Unlike the senior picture in my yearbook, there are no incriminating photos.

Of course, later on, I realized it was a bad idea. But, one's perspective on fashion can be fickle, if not completely embarrassing; especially in retrospect.

Whatever became of those pants? I came to my senses and cut them up for cleaning rags. However, I held onto the shirt for THIRTY-FIVE years, until I moved to Tucson. I only got rid of it because I had to iron it after every cleaning ... I was retiring with other priorities.

Thankfully, there are some regrettable choices that can be "fixed" and aren't as indelible as a picture on the page.

In the Eighties, when I was still in New York City doing the rounds as an auditioning actor, I became frustrated because no one was pronouncing my last name correctly. The original Italian pronunciation of Cupo is "coo-poh". However, my great grandfather "Americanized" the name to be pronounced as "cue-poh"; as in Cupie Doll or cutie (tee hee). Unfortunately, at the time, I was hearing a lot of "Cup-oh" or "Cooper". The actors' union, Actors' Equity, allows you to change your name for free; but only once. If you change it again, you pay a penalty. So, I got this bright idea that if I changed my name to reflect how I wanted it to sound, the problem would be solved. Thus, I had my appellation altered to Steven Q. Poe. I was certain it would do the trick! I couldn't WAIT to go to my next audition.

So, come time, I got to the appointed place early and signed in with my new name, Steven Q. Poe. Auditions began and my turn was coming up. At last, I was next. The door opened and the monitor called out, "Steven Poe!".

"WHAT HAPPENED TO THE 'Q'????"

I didn't protest, though. I just slunk in and slunk out.

Next audition: "Mr. Poe?"

Next audition: "Steven Poe?"

I paid the penalty fee to have my name changed back. At least, I was able to undo the error of my ways.

Sometimes you have to pay the price for those regrettable choices.

But, dontcha know, I have friends from my New York City days that still call me “Mr. Poe”. I suppose I deserve it.

However, one of my favorite stories of correcting a bad decision comes from an acquaintance of mine from my time in New York City.

As she told it, she had been to a “high end” soiree one evening. After a night of rich food and a few too many cocktails it was time to go home. Being the seasoned New Yorker that she was, she made the bad decision to walk home, even though she was dressed to the nines. This was a big mistake because she didn’t live in the greatest neighborhood.

Sure enough, as she was getting near her apartment, in the distance, she saw a gang of young thugs coming toward her on the opposite side of the street. They must have seen her walking alone, because they crossed to her side and were now a few hundred yards away from her and were quickly gaining ground. She knew she had to do something to correct the situation. Thinking fast, she stepped into a shadow, shoved her purse down the front of her dress, messed up her hair and smeared her makeup all over her face. When the gang was within a few feet of her, she jumped out of the shadow, threw her arms out to her sides and yelled, “COME TO JEESHUSH!!!”

The hoods ran back across the street.

Now THAT’S how you fix a bad decision!

Not all of us think on their feet as quickly as my friend did. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have the opportunity to right a wrong. Sometimes it simply takes just a little motivation or inventive thought. Or sometimes we need to eat a little humble pie to make things right. Whatever the case, we are an imperfect crowd and need to recognize we all have “clay feet”. The potential for making a big judgment “foo-pah” is universal. All we can do is try to forgive ourselves ... as well as one another. If we remember that small fact, we will surely have our own “come to Jesus” moment. And I mean that in the best way.

Un-perfectly yours,

President of the Bad Decision Club

## “Don’t touch that dial!”

Before I begin this account of life-changing stuff from my past, I probably need to ‘splain to all those readers born after 1980 what exactly was a dial.

A dial was a knob that stuck out of an electronic device such as a television or radio which was manually turned in order to change or tune in a station that you were desiring to watch or listen to. Television dials were usually, but not always ... depending on how “innovative” the maker wanted to seem ... placed on the front of the set, just to the side of the screen. As you turned the dial (again, by hand), it clicked forward or backward through the numbers of 2 to 13; each number representing a channel (ie - NBC, CBS or ABC). There also was a slightly larger dial surrounding the outside of the main dial that, when turned, gave you a public access station (now known as PBS). However, the only way you could achieve the public access channel was by clicking your main dial to the space between the 2 and the 13 and praying to the television gods there was some kind of reachable signal that day. But, because of signal unreliability, the channel was usually ignored, just as I will now do.

People of a certain age (“‘certain age’, my heinie bumper!”) will remember the phrase “don’t touch that dial”. It was often used by some unknown announcer telling you not to touch your dial to change the station, lest you miss the exciting programming just ahead. It was more to get you to watch the upcoming cigarette commercial that was trying to sell you a quicker path to your demise; albeit glamorously.

So, where is this leading?

Have you ever BEEN on television?

I have ... exactly three times. Well, maybe not EXACTLY three. The second time was in a commercial, which would make it a whole bunch of second times. However, I consider all of its airings a ONE TIME experience because that is exactly how many times I was paid for it.

Before my first real live television studio experience, my older brother, John, preceded me. For both of us, that was on “The Freddie Freihofer Show”.

There were plenty of “live” kids shows in the early days of television. However, like “The Howdy Doody Show” or “Captain Kangaroo“, most of them were nationally syndicated. Most local stations had a “Romper Room”, with their own Miss [insert name here]. But that was a franchise, like McDonald’s, so it wasn’t truly local.

But Freddie Freihofer, HE was a Capital District child’s local idol!

(Just so you are in the know, the cities of Albany, Schenectady and Troy in upstate New York are referred to as “the Capital District”.)

Freihofer's Bakery originated in my home town of Schenectady, NY. (That was before General Foods bought them out and ruined all the Freihofer products.) To promote their goods, Freihofer's Bakery created "The Freddie Freihofer Show" which ran from 1949 to 1967. It essentially had a host (Freddie Freihofer) who arrived on the set in his Freihofer Bakery truck to a screaming mob of kidlings on bleachers, sitting in front of a dozen or so birthday cakes. If it was your birthday, you got a free cake. If not, you received a box of cookies or danish or whatever was leftover from the bakery that week.

Over its history, there were six hosts that played Freddie Freihofer. However, by far the BEST host was a guy named Jim Fisk. As a professional artist, his Freddie Freihofer had a great gimmick by drawing a picture using the scribble a kid first made on a large pad of art paper. The watch cry every child in that studio would wait for was Freddie calling out "Who wants to squiggle?" And they would all scream in unison "MEEEEEE!" Freddie would then pick out a kid, place the pad in front of him or her and have them draw something. Usually, it was just a bunch of loops or zig-zags. Then, Jim Fisk (as Freddie Freihofer) would create a picture from the mess that was handed back to him. Usually it was a bunny.

Anyway, my brother, John, was first to go to the WRGB studios to be on "Freddie Freihofer" for his birthday. I couldn't go because my four year old self was still too young even for "Freddie Freihofer".

I remember being at my Grammie's house watching the show. There on the screen was my brother, John! I kept saying "hi!" to him, but he wouldn't answer back. I thought that was quite rude. Did he think he was so special being on "Freddie Freihofer" that he couldn't return a salutation from his own brother???

My poor grandmother tried to explain the subtleties of television programming, but I would have none of it.

I was still incensed when John came home and I gave him as much of my four year old attitude as I could muster. However, I was quickly assuaged with a piece of the birthday cake he brought home.

Sugar was and still is a great leveler.

It was then decided by the powers that be, on my next birthday, when I turned five, I should appear on "Freddie Freihofer". I assume the grownups figured, taking me there and showing me the ins and outs would be the best way to help wrap my brain around the process.

Thus, for the first time, I appeared on television.

I confess, I wasn't impressed. The lights were too hot. The kids were too loud. And, when off-camera, Freddie Freihofer was just an ordinary guy. And when they broke the "live" portion to air a cartoon, we didn't get to see it!

Hmph!

However, all the kids did get a squiggle. Freddie stayed after the program was over in order to make sure we each had our own memento.

So, I did get my birthday cake. And my squiggle.

It was a bunny.

The second time I appeared on T.V. was when I was doing dinner theatre in Lexington, KY in 1977.

A local ad agency had contacted the theatre at which I was working (Diner's Playhouse) looking for "talent" they could use in a local television commercial for a trophy shop. Specifically, they needed an actor who could pass as a teenager. Well, considering I was 23 at the time playing a 14 year old on stage, they decided I fit the bill. In the commercial, I was to be "awarded" a trophy for being the "World's Worst Paperboy".

The shoot was early in the morning in a housing development very near the theatre. Being the OCD fella I am, I arrived at the appointed site in plenty of time before the shoot was to begin. The prop guy was there with "my" bicycle and a couple of the crew, but, essentially, no one else was around. We waited and waited ... and waited. Some of the ad agency folks showed up, then some of the camera crew, but still no director. Finally, after what seemed like an overly long, impolite passage of time, the people who were in charge of actually shooting the thing arrived.

However, come to find out, they had NO idea how they were going to film the commercial. There were to be eight shots: me riding the bike, me throwing the paper, the paper flying past the homeowner and landing in the bushes, the homeowner throwing a trophy at me, the trophy knocking me off my bike, me reading the plaque on the trophy, me turning to face the camera and finally the reveal of the plaque "World's Worst Paperboy". The problem was, before they all had arrived, nobody had thought through how to actually film the shots. Some shots were going to be tricky, especially the one with the trophy knocking me to the ground. They hadn't figured out how it would happen without me getting seriously injured!

So after a lot of hemming and hawing, they decided to scrap the shoot.

In my head, I yelled "Oh NONONONONONO you don't!" I didn't say it out loud, but my brain began churning (as it is "wont to do"). That cancellation was NOT going to happen. I had a commercial to shoot and they were NOT going to pull that rug out from under me. So, I obnoxiously stuck my nose in their business and not so subtly "suggested" how it could be done. I even showed them the best angles to use in order to get the effects they wanted.

(I can be so pushy sometimes. It really is uncharacteristic of me. However, when times get tough, the tough get annoying; motivated, but annoying.)

And they all went for it! I don't know why. I guess they assumed I was some kind-a perfeshunall and knew what I was doing. When, in fact, I was just winging it. But, you know what? The thing got made!

After the commercial began airing, I found it funny that people who came to see the show at Diner's Playhouse began recognizing me from seeing me on television. You see, each night, after the performance was over, the actors would run to the lobby in order to greet the exiting audience. We called it the "joyed it" line (as in "I enjoyed it.") As a matter of fact, when I talked to the audience, they seemed more excited about the commercial than the show they had just seen.

When I left for other parts unknown after the run of the show was over, I heard through the grapevine that the commercial actually won a local advertising award in Lexington.

(The thank you card from the ad agency must have gotten lost in the mail.)

When I returned to Lexington to do a show some five years later, the commercial was STILL running on television.

It was then I realized I wish I had negotiated for residual pay and received a stipend every time it was aired instead of just getting a measly one time fee. I could have paid off my college loans.

Oh, well.

The final time I appeared on the "small screen" (which, these days, ain't so small) was in 2009, when my darling Danny and I appeared on "Antiques Roadshow": Atlantic City, Season 14, Episode 4.

Again, for those of you who need some learnifyin', "Antiques Roadshow" is a program that has appeared on PBS for years in which folks bring in a treasured item from home to a central location where it is appraised by a professional expert in the field of which that item or items is categorized. The "fun" happens when a piece of crap end table the person bought at a flea market turns out to be an 18th century game table worth \$250,000.

Anyway, the way one gets on "Antiques Roadshow" is by lottery. The list of cities the "Roadshow" are going to that season is posted online months before they begin filming. You, then, choose your preferred city and time you would like to go.

The closest city to DC, where we were currently living was Atlantic City. So I filled out my little form, sent it in and waited. Sure enough, a few months later, I was informed that my name had been chosen and two entry tickets would be sent to me. When they arrived, I had to laugh. They looked almost exactly like the Golden Ticket from the movie "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory".

(As an aside here, I once did a play with Diana Sowle the actress who portrayed Charlie's mother in the original movie. She had an actual Golden Ticket from the movie framed and hung on her living room wall!)

The first thing I did was book a motel room. Frugal me (cheap), I reserved one just outside the city, so as to save some money. That worked out great because we also had free parking at the Atlantic City Convention Center where the "festivities" were taking place.

Being our reserved entry time was at 9:00 the morning, we got ourselves up in plenty of time to arrive and park. There were already a multitude of people when we got there. When we came up from the parking garage, a cheery volunteer checked our tickets and directed us to a large room set aside for waiting. There were stanchions all over the room with people already waiting in several lines. The stanchion at the front of each line had a time posted on it. We were 9:00am, so we dutifully took our proper place.

That part of the day was a lot of fun because everyone was SO excited to be there. It was an intense sense of camaraderie. As we slowly snaked through the stanchions, we all chatted about what we each had brought, oohing and aahing over the stories being told.

Being that each person was allowed two items, Danny brought a Steiff bear that had belonged to his Granmaw Engeljohn and a piece of rare cranberry opalescent hobnail glass that he collected. I brought a mother-of-pearl toiletry set that once belonged to my Great Aunt Louise and a Japanese Samurai war sword my dad picked up in Japan at the end of WWII.

(We had only just recovered that sword the year before after it had been missing for decades.

When my mother died, we had a service at the gravesite, per her wishes. Just as we were ending, a car appeared, driven by an old neighborhood friend, Marilyn Primett. As she got out of her car and was opening her car trunk, I walked up to her to greet her and tell her she had just missed the service. She was more focused on what was in her trunk. As I neared her, she reached in and pulled out the missing Samurai sword. We Cupo's were all stunned. She told us, when we were kids, my older brother, John, had let her borrow it to protect herself from a series of break-ins in our neighborhood. She had never returned it and, over the years, kept missing her chance to give it back. She knew we would all be gathered on that day, so here she was!

John said he had no memory of it.

We always wondered what happened to that sword.)

Anyway, back to "Antiques Roadshow" ...

As it neared our time to go in, we got to the front of our stanchion line. We were ushered to a triage table. It was there an appraiser determined which specific appraisal area we should bring our precious items to. (ie - Toys, Military, Art, Furniture, etc).

Finally, we were able to enter into the main hall where the actual appraisals were taking place. To me, it looked like orderly chaos. There were volunteers running around, several people in line at the various appraisal stations, producers speaking to prospective candidates for airtime, actual recording of segments and just a general hubbub going on. Everything seemed in constant motion.

Danny and I agreed to split up to go to our various appraisal tables. I, first, waited in line with my Aunt Louise's set. The line moved along fairly well. When it was my turn, I was quickly told "twenty-five dollars" and was sent on my way.

Okay then.

So it wasn't a huge heirloom piece, but I still had that Samurai sword in my hand.

The triage person had sent me to "Oriental Art" instead of "Military", so I figured they knew what they were doing and off I went.

When I got to the table, the extreeeemely bored appraiser (whom I recognized from previous "Roadshow" appearances) was leaning back in his chair. Not moving, he glanced at my sword and said, "We see those all the time. They were army issue by the Japanese military. \$400.00". He then physically dismissed me by turning to another appraiser.

"Nice to meet you, too."

Well, it wasn't going to pay off our mortgage afterall.

Danny didn't have much luck either. The one appraiser didn't have a clue what Danny's glass was worth. And the toy expert was on location somewhere in the city, filming a "special segment" for the show. All we got was his business card. We waited around a bit in hopes that the toy guy would come back soon, but gave up after about twenty minutes.

(I did reach him by email a few days later. After sending him pictures of the bear, he said it wasn't in the best condition and appraised it for about \$100.) It was when we were about to walk out of the main hall that we saw a sign that read "The Feedback Booth".

Again, for those who ain't in the know, "The Feedback Booth" is a segment at the end of each show where various folks show off their items and comment on their experience of waiting in line and their various appraisals.

Spontaneously, Danny and I decided to do it!

However, when we looked inside the "tent" where the segments were being filmed, there wasn't a cameraman. There was a camera, but no one was visibly operating it. Then we saw a sign stating that the operator was at lunch, but the camera was still

running. We should go ahead and have our say. So, we did. We weren't sure if it was all a ruse to appease any surly participants, but we decided to go for it. What did we have to lose?

That was how Danny and I ended up on national television. The camera HAD been rolling afterall! Someone must have thought we were cute or eccentric (probably the latter) and aired our clip.

When you see it, Danny, surprisingly, does most of the talking. I stand next to him hyperactively gesticulating to the items he talks about. He ends by saying how much fun it was, even though our items weren't worth much. I shrug and finally speak by saying, "Oh, well!"

Years afterward, every time "our" segment reran, we would hear from family or friends. The funny thing is that they usually recognized our voices before they realized it was us.

Anyway, it WAS fun. In spite of not inheriting objects worth huge amounts of money from our relatives and the sometime surliness from the appraisers, we had a ball. We would do it again, if we had the opportunity. And even though I applied a few more times, I never again "won" the lottery.

In retrospect, with ALL my vast television experience, the medium can sometimes seem so glamorous to a viewer. But the hard work and pandemonium backstage is unmistakable and can be slightly off-putting. I should know. As you can see, I am a seasoned veteran of the industry.

But if you yourself ever get the opportunity to follow in my footsteps, just remember to negotiate a good salary, get residual pay, bring along something that is valuable and always, always get a piece of birthday cake.

If so, your professionalism will be evident and will certainly be worth the experience.

A hardened pro,  
Mr. Television

## Letting your hair down

I seem to be the product of a cliché. My father's side of the family was Italian, ergo they were barbers, hairdressers and generally performed miracles with folks' hair. Well, I suppose the stereotype could have been even more extreme. They all could have been in the Mafia.

Well, there were some suspicious rumblings surrounding the activities of my Great Uncle Everard who owned a garage in Schenectady, NY in the 1930's and 1940's (which, by the way, was where MY father, Everard, worked when he got out of the service after WWII). But, for the most part, the rumors remained as such and the whisperings of some sort of involvement with the Mafia seemed to waft away with the passage of time.

However, there is the exception of my father's mother, Mary, but that was another kind of involvement. To be clear, she wasn't some kind-a gangster's moll. She was simply friends with "Lucky" Luciano, Mr. Mafia Kingpin himself. They had met when they were young teenagers in New York City. My grandmother was a milliner (hat maker, for them that need edumacating) and "Lucky" was the boy that delivered the finished hats to the customers. When he quit after winning some big money in a dice game, they remained lifelong friends. Even as adults, the families would exchange Christmas cards.

(How's THAT for showing the seamy underbelly of my tribe?)

Anyway, as I was saying, my dad's dad started out as a barber and quickly moved into hairdressing, where the big money was.

He began his tonsorial career early in life and, due to some success, very quickly rented out a space for his own barber shop in the arcade of the State Theatre.

(The State was a huge movie palace built in 1922. In those days, all the prestigious movie houses were built with an attached, enclosed shopping area, usually consisting of a long tiled hallway with stores and novelty shops lining the walkway. That area was called an "arcade". Now ya learned another sumpthing!)

His barber shop was quite large with many other barbers working for him or renting out a space. He even created different hair products (pomades) to help control men's hair and maintain that "slicked back" style of the twenties and thirties.

In New York State, at the time, you either had a barber's license to cut hair or a hairdresser's license to, well, do MORE than cut hair. That was because with all the chemicals for dying or bleaching or curling or perming, you needed some specialized training so the stuff wouldn't (a) maim or kill you; or (b) maim or kill your customer.

When Daddy Joe (that's what we called my grandfather) decided to focus on becoming a hairdresser rather than just being a barber, he left his storefront in the State

Theatre arcade and opened a shop a few blocks away, smack in the middle of downtown Schenectady's shopping district. Granted, it was on the second floor above a Thom McAn's shoe store, but it was in the hubbub of the hub.

(A great thing about having your shop above a shoe store and sharing the building's space was that you got all your new shoes at a discount. Score!)

With the new location, he not only received a lot more walk-in customers, he would get business from the vaudeville performers who were stopping in town to perform.

You see, just down the street was another even larger movie palace called Proctor's Theatre. Now, Proctor's not only showed movies, it was a major venue in a prominent, national vaudeville circuit owned and managed by the Proctor organization. Because Daddy Joe's new shop was really just steps from the theatre, he got all kinds of business from the performers of the day.

One of my favorite pictures is of him giving a male dancer a permanent wave. Apparently, this artiste was part of an "adagio act" where a man and a woman do acrobatics, lifts and feats of balancing, along with incorporating some dancing ... not unlike what you might see today in "Cirque du Soleil".

Daddy Joe had just bleached this man's hair, but to do the permanent wave, he was using a device that always fascinated and horrified me. This monster of a contraption hung from the ceiling. At first glance, it looked like a hairdryer on steroids. But on closer inspection, it had about fifty black wires dangling out of the bottom, so that it resembled a mutant octopus. All of the wires had a metal hair clip attached to the ends. The hairdresser would apply the solution for the permanent onto his "victim's" head, then clip the multiple wires to hair rollers or directly to the customer's hair to create the wave. Then, like in Frankenstein, a switch would be thrown and currents of electricity would flow through the wires into the hair clips to heat them up and activate the solution.

(I wonder why more people didn't get killed from this process?)

Anyway, the picture showing the contrast between the "wired up", somewhat effete, bleached blonde dancer getting the treatment from my burly, Popeyed-armed, Italian grandfather in his white coat is just too good.

(My dad has that shot somewhere. I'll ask him to dig it out sometime.)

So speaking of my father, after his Uncle Everard died (way too young) and the garage closed, it was decided (probably by my grandparents) that dad would go to beauty school (as it was called) and join his father in the business. It turned out he had a real proclivity for "doing" hair. And that is what my father did for a living until he retired.

(A special perk of having one's father as a hairdresser is that I spent the first third of my life getting free haircuts. It wasn't until I was 23 that I actually had to pay for a cut. I don't think my mother EVER went out to have her hair done.)

But back to the start of the first third of my life ... I entered the picture in 1954.

I often went to visit the hair salon above the shoe store whenever it was time for my mother to take me or my brother, John, to get new shoes. In order to get to their salon, you walked up a very steep, long, shadowy stairway lined with some dark wainscoting. When you got to the top, you turned right to face a short hallway with a couple of office doors on the left with yellow glass insets. One of them was the business office for Thom McAn's store downstairs.

(I remember sitting with the Thom McAn bookkeeper on a few occasions. She was a very sweet young woman who taught me how to make snow flakes by cutting the corners from folded typing paper.)

At the end of the hallway, you turned right and then a fast left to enter the beauty salon; a world of strange artifacts, odd smells and thousands of things to scrutinize. However I never went near that permanent wave machine. It was too creepy looking for my young self.

My father tells the story of one regular customer (an older lady) who loved their work, but whose arthritis wouldn't allow her to climb the steep stairs. To get to their salon, she would sit on the steps and go up backward on her rear end! After she was beautified, she would scoot back down the stairs on her bum. Now that's whatcha call a loyal customer. Daddy Joe and dad must have been really good at what they did.

After Daddy Joe died in 1959, dad stayed on in that shop for a few more years. Unfortunately, in the early sixties, the building was sold to make way for some urban development, so my father had to move.

(Thank GOODNESS he left that ugly permanent wave machine contraption there to be destroyed with the rest of the building.)

After some searching, he found this odd little cinder block, one story building that sat in the corner of a parking lot overlooking the city of Schenectady. It had only one main room with a small store room and restroom ... and that was it! He dubbed it Everard's Beauty Fair.

(I keep a business card in my jewelry box.)

Anyway, all the regular customers from the downtown store followed him to that funny little shop in the parking lot.

I recall, when I was in high school, I and a few classmates made a silent movie for a social studies class. Being that we were setting the film in the 1920's and I was playing the hero, I needed to slick back my hair. My father still had an old tin of Daddy Joe's pomade he had created all those years before, saying to me I could use some. Well, in

1971, I had really thick, curly hair. I needed a LOT of product to keep my “do” in place. When filming was completed, I went home to wash the stuff out of my hair. Nothing came out. I washed it again. Again ... no change. I washed a third time and STILL it was as greasy as I started. I then went to dad to ask him what I should do. He asked me how much I used. I told him half the can. It was then he told me I was only supposed to use a “bead’s” worth in the palm of my hand. He showed me the tin where it stated that the main ingredient of the pomade was Vaseline and how to use it! (my darling Danny always says I never pay attention. It was true even then). Subsequently, I got to have my own little trip to Everard’s Beauty Fair. As I remember, it took SEVENTEEN washings by my professional father in order to get my hair looking somewhat normal again. (Hey! Maybe THAT’S why I am bald today. Hmmm ...)

But as the years passed, so did the customers. As a matter of fact, often my dad assisted his customers even in death. There was many a time he went to a funeral parlor to give a former patron their final hairdo.

A satisfied customer is forever.

However, by the mid-seventies, with his customers dwindling, it was time to close up that shop as well.

Over the following few years, Dad rented a few booths at various salons near his home, but finally retired by the end of the seventies.

But the story didn’t end there.

The house my parents lived in, which they bought when I went off to college in 1972, was an old Cape Cod style house with a cinder block basement that had a REALLY steep, rickety wooden stairway.

Well, wouldn’t you know, most of the customers who were still alive wouldn’t allow him to fully retire and ended up “following“ my dad home! He had set up his salon chair and tools of the trade down there and used an old cement utility sink to wash and dye hair. The vision of some of those OLDER woman getting down (and UP) those stairs in order to get their hair done was a throwback to that lady at the old shop going up those steps backwards, on her butt. All to have their dos done by someone they knew and trusted for so many years.

Maybe that’s what we need these days; someone or something personal from the business world that makes us feel special; creating a kind of loyalty in us we can return for the good service offered. Think about that next time you are choosing a business to patronize. Are they good enough to make you want to go up a steep stairway on your butt ... backwards? Seems to me that would be an appropriate criteria.

Looking forward to getting my butt back out there,  
A potential regular customer

## Doing what comes naturally

Kids are insubordinate.

In my old codger-dom, as I metaphorically reflect on the child that I was, I stand on my front porch and wave my proverbial cane, yelling, "You kids get off my lawn!" This is all figuratively speaking, of course. Being that I live in a 55 and older association, there aren't a whole lot of young'uns running around trampling one's azaleas. Plus, being in the desert, there aren't a whole lot of azaleas TO trample.

So, back to my original statement: kids are insubordinate.

What I mean is, looking back on what I did as a child, I was a rebel through and through. Even though I had the demeanor of a lovely cherub, I constantly traded in that angelic air for someone with a modicum of regard for authority. I put on a good face, however, the last thing you wanted to do was say I couldn't do something. To me, "no" was not a directive, it was a challenge.

But I have to admit, I was not alone in this. There was a sibling or two, as well as an assortment of playmates who were of the same mind as I. Our collective tenet was "Let's see how much we can get away with without being caught." We spent our entire childhoods in subterfuge, bucking the word "no".

There is a song from the old Off Broadway musical "The Fantasticks" (I've done it three times: college, summer stock and bus-and-truck tour) in which two fathers self-congratulate themselves on their parenting skills. They sing, "to manipulate children you merely say no". The gist being, if you say "no" to your kids, they are going to do the opposite.

My point exactly.

However, it wasn't that my parents were being clever in their disciplinary skills, we kids simply did what we were told not to do.

("Forgive me Father ...")

Actually, it was my mother who was the real authority in our household. Lawd forbid you got in trouble under her watch. Her quick temper and sharp tongue would strike fear in the most hardened disposition. However, I suppose that was what made our insubordination even more exciting. It was like those people in a scary movie who go into what they know is a dangerously haunted house, but they go in anyway for the emotionally heightened adventure of it all. With the wrath of my mother hanging over us like The Sword of Damocles", we were living on the edge! How could we pass up the opportunity? We were moths to a flame; knowing it was wrong, but unable to stop ourselves from getting burned.

There were two places we were forbidden to go to that drew us like magnets.

The first was the ruined site of one of the locks of the old Erie Canal. It was conveniently located near the bottom of the hill (and across a marsh) from where I lived. When the Erie Canal was in full operation, it ran along the banks of the Mohawk River (which was also near where I lived) and through the city of Schenectady.

(As a matter of fact, in 1918, when they dismantled part of it for a snappier waterway utilizing the Mohawk River itself, they filled in the “ditch” to create the widest street in the downtown area. My Daddy Joe’s barber shop overlooked that newly coined “Erie Boulevard”.)

Anyway, the main reason we were told not to go down to the ruined Erie Canal near us was that “we could get hurt” and “there were river rats”. Come oooooon!!! You say “river rats” to a child and expect them NOT to go see for themselves? (Sadly, I never did see a river rat.)

Just mucking through the marsh to get to the abandoned lock was an adventure unto itself. You had to know exactly where to step, otherwise, your foot would get soaked or, even worse, it would get sucked down into the mire. More than once I lifted up my misplaced foot to reveal only a muddy sock; my shoe still glued to the swampy compost in amidst the reeds. Oh, well. A soiled, sodden shoe was worth the price of admission.

What was left of the lock really didn’t look like much. Of course it was covered with every plant known to humanity ... possibly including a two thousand year old Joshua Tree ... or so it seemed. The ditch where the water once flowed was still intact as was some of the stone and brick works of the lock mechanism itself. The ruts of the tow paths where thousands of mules’ hooves pounded the soil were still visible, even under the grass. Otherwise, there wasn’t much else to look at.

I suppose the excitement of going there and getting back without getting caught was what drove us. But truly, once you got there, there wasn’t much for a kid to do.

However, the OTHER forbidden location whose siren song lured us in, was a child’s dreamscape of adventure. It was simply known as “the crick”.

“The crick” was a stream that cut a path through the hills around my house, creating a stream bed at the bottom of a small canyon filled with rocks for walking on or looking under. Its source was somewhere beyond the Strang’s farm, just on the other side of an old hump-back bridge that took a roadway over some railroad tracks and “the crick” itself. On its other end, the stream emptied out into the shoe-eating marsh, which eventually became either part of the Mohawk River or fed the aquifer under the flood plain upon which the marsh grew. The aquifer was an underground lake that offered Schenectady the BEST water any bottling company could hope for; and we got it for free out of our faucets! (“Take THAT Poland Springs!!!”)

The reasons we were given for not being allowed to go down to “the crick“ was the usual “you could get hurt” (heard it before) and “there are snakes”. Now that last warning was true. There were water moccasins that populated the waterway. They tended to be quite large and very poisonous. But a little thing like a poison-filled, death machine wasn’t going to stop us kids from making our forbidden trek. No way!

To get to “the crick”, you walked down the road in front of my house to the bottom of a steep hill. There, you took a sharp right behind a gas station onto a small gravel road that hosted three forlorn looking houses. At the end of the road was a raised mound of land on which dwelt a broken down old mansion owned by the Bacons. At that point, a steep hill rose to your right and an extension of the marsh spread out to your left. It was there you looked for an innocuous break in the reeds where a well-worn footpath was hidden. Taking the path through the thick marsh grass, skirting the Bacon’s home, took you deep into the overgrowth. The only way you could stop from getting slapped in the face by the grasses was by putting both your hands out in front of you and looking at your feet ... particularly important in order to stay on the narrow path.

After a few minutes, the marsh suddenly ended with the appearance of a large, natural pool of water into which the stream flowed from up ahead. Immediately beyond, trees rose up on either side of the waterway in two canyon walls. The change was abrupt and beautiful.

From there the real fun began!

Our usual modus operandi took us slowly upstream, looking under rocks for “crawdads” (crayfish) or frogs. Once, my friend Jay turned over a large rock to discover a water moccasin resting peacefully. He (she?) wasn’t pleased to be disturbed. We didn’t wait around for its rebuke.

I loved walking up the water using the scattered rocks and stones as my footpath. It became a game that passed the time and assuaged my OCD brain. It was cool and tranquil with the bower of trees overhead and the flowing water underfoot, so usually I got “lost” in the placidness in spite of myself.

We usually wended our way up the babbling water until we reached the old hump-backed bridge. It took between a half an hour to an hour, depending on how much we dawdled on the way. We, then, turned around and moseyed our way back down stream, passed the pool, around Bacon’s house and to the gravel road.

The real tricky part was getting back home without getting caught. Early on, we figured out, if we crossed the road to my house at the bottom of our hill and went up a rarely used trail directly behind my property, it was easy to make it look like we had just been playing in and around my back yard. I didn’t really like going that way because of

the mosquitoes and the pricker bushes, but, if it was a way out of trouble, it was worth the sacrifice.

Though, I do remember do getting caught. When my brother, John, and I went into the house after one foray, my mother, in a surprisingly calm voice said, "You've been where I told you not to go, weren't you?" We were stunned! Who ratted us out? Rather than being contrite, I remember asking, "How did you find out?" (Remember, I didn't have too much respect for authority). She simply replied, "A little birdie told me" ... and left us to shake in our boots. Gratefully, she must have decided our guilt was punishment enough because she never did bring down "the hammer".

I never felt guilty. And I never figured out who that blasted birdie was.

There was one time at "the crick", however, where my mother's words did ring true. It was wintertime. Brother John and I, along with a couple of friends, decided to take a rare cold weather visit there. When we got to the pool at the marsh's end, we discovered it was frozen over. Someone said we should slide on it. However, most of us were "scardy cats" because we weren't sure how frozen it actually was. John was always the one most likely to do something stupid and take the dare. He did. He got to the middle and immediately plunged through the not-so solid barrier of ice. Of course, we all screamed. He couldn't get any traction in order to get out. We tried to help, but we couldn't reach him. Peter Wintergerst even stretched out on his stomach on the still intact ice at the pool's edge, but to no avail. Quickly John started to really freeze up! Finally somebody (me?) found a long, branch with which John could grab onto. I do remember sticking it out over the ice to help him, but I didn't have the strength to actually pull him out. Yelling and crying (at that point), the other kids joined in and, together, we managed to drag him out.

It was awful and exhilarating at the same time. But we knew we had to get him warm as fast as we could. Half running, half staggering through the reeds, we shoved him home. Lucky for us, both our parents were working that day. After I helped get his frozen clothes off him, he took a hot bath.

When my mother got home from work and saw his, by then, thawed and soggy clothes hanging where we put our outside winter clothing, she was amazed on how wet we got playing in the snow.

She wasn't fooled, I'm sure.

The moral of the story?

Of course, I should say, listen to your mother. She is a sage person, full of wisdom and worthy of respect.

However, the true meaning is to be careful in whatever you do. It's okay to take chances but don't be stupid about it.

Oh!

And don't get caught.

"I didn't know it was wrong."

Cupo

## Things that go bump ... Some good ol' fashioned ghost stories

"Listen, my children, and you shall hear,  
The spookiest, scariest tale of the year ..."

That's how I began my Fourth Grade Halloween poem for which I won a giant Hershey's chocolate bar at my elementary school's Halloween dance.

The only scary thing about that night was the bullies who bugged me for winning. But I got the last laugh when I walked out with that HUGE candy bar.

So, with THAT in mind, let's drive away all those tormentors with some spooky, scary tales!

Happy Halloween, all you ghoulies, princesses, zombies and super heroes. It's that time of the year when you form a circle with your friends in a dark room and pass around a flashlight to heighten the shadows of your face as you each tell your scariest ghost story.

Mwah hah hah haaaaah!

I know I have written about a few preternatural capers from my past, but there is always room for a few more, especially when there is a full moon on All Hallows' Eve and the mists are rising.

Of course, in a drought in the Tucson desert where I live, there ain't a whole lotta mist rising. But that's why we have our imaginations.

Picture, in your mind's eye, the mists rising on the moors and the hounds baying in the distance, while the moon peers down from behind the scattered, moody clouds, as I, first, pass the flashlight to my younger brother Mike, who has a good story to tell. It happened in his youth, but the experience still stays with him. And it wasn't even at night.

He actually didn't reveal the tale to anyone until one evening, when I was living at home, just after my college years around 1977. We were watching a television show called "In Search Of", which examined supernatural occurrences. After we watched an episode about ghosts, he quietly said, "I saw one once". I was stunned and was excitedly compelled to beg him for the whole story.

Reluctantly, he began ...

Mike had gone on vacation to Old Orchard Beach on the coast of Maine with his best friend, Jeff and his family. Mike and Jeff were about 12 years old at the time, so this occurred sometime in the early 1970's.

The house they were staying at belonged to a long-time friend of Jeff's mother whose son had committed suicide in the house.

There was a forbidden room, which was the deceased son's bedroom. Mike said they would often hear music playing from that room, knowing it was empty and no one was in there.

As you would expect (from watching too many horror movies), the structure was on a bluff overlooking the ocean. There was a balcony jutting out over the sand with no access to the beach other than through the house.

Mike and Jeff were playing in their room when Mike looked up, toward the windows facing the water. He saw, what he thought was, one of Jeff's brothers watching them through the open window to the balcony as they played. However, as Mike watched, the "person" faded away.

Jeff's back was to the window. So, by the time Mike said, "Look!" and Jeff turned around, the specter was gone. Mike just mumbled something like, "I thought I saw something", but never let on what exactly he experienced; that was, until that evening those few years later in our parents' living room.

However, even now, Mike swears he knows what he saw. And, to this day, is a believer.

That's Mike's story.

But, now that the flashlight is back in my hands, it's my turn to shake you up with a tale or two. But don't fret. Both yarns happened in broad daylight.

first one from me is a shorty, but no less weird.

When my darling Danny, my dad and I were getting ready to move to Tucson from DC, we would regularly take a short drive to a facility called Value Village to donate some stuff we had decided not to bring with us when we moved. It was a recycled item store that used its income to benefit children all over the world.

Anyway, on the way back from one such outing, we stopped at a busy intersection to wait for traffic to clear so we could turn left in order to go home. Danny was driving, I was in the front passenger seat and dad was in the back seat. The area was a typical neighborhood for DC. There were semi-attached townhomes built in the Fifties and Sixties interspersed with older single family homes. However, this section of town was dominated by a huge cemetery, which was directly across the main road from where we were currently waiting to turn.

As we waited, a young-ish woman, in her late twenties, crossed the street in front of our car, along the edge of our bumper. It was a bright, sunny Sunday afternoon, so nothing seemed usual, except for the fact that the woman was transparent! I could see the cemetery across the street right through her!

She was dressed in a flowered print dress; the kind that was popular in the Thirties and Forties. It was a small print with lilac and white flowers on a brown

background. She had dark blonde hair that was to her shoulders, but the bangs were tightly rolled in a 1940's style.

As she reached the other corner, she simply "blew away" like dust in the wind. Literally, she just swirled into nothingness.

Danny nor dad saw her. Danny was looking at the traffic to the side of the car and dad simply wasn't looking out the front windshield.

It happened so fast! However, I was not frightened. These things happen to me from time to time, so I just chalked it up to another "incident". It was a shock, though.

Sort of like this next "incident". It wasn't scary to me. As a matter of fact, as it was occurring, I was calmly analyzing what I was looking at; trying to determine if it meant anything. Come to find out, it probably did.

Again, this happened in DC. Back in the Nineties, I knew a man named Mark who was a budding composer of stage musicals. Over the years, he had asked if I would participate in the various staged "readings" of his material, so he could hear how it was developing.

These readings were usually for a small invited audience. The performers sat or stood at music stands and "read" and sang the script and score for the onlookers. It usually took a small amount of rehearsal and the pay was generous.

On this occasion, I was in Mark's beautiful new condo smack downtown in DC. It was a gorgeous new building that was built on Pennsylvania Avenue, overlooking the new Naval Memorial Plaza with the mast and crow's nest of the U.S.S. Maine ("Remember the Maine" ... or did you forget?) directly in view from his living room window.

Mark needed to go to his regular job as a lawyer, so the music director, my friend Howard, and I were alone in the apartment working on the music together. The residence was long, with the kitchen on one end and the living room on the other. Mark's music area was delineated between the spaces by a huge grand piano.

As Howard and I were rehearsing, I noticed white smoke coming from a wall near the end of the piano. I kept singing, but was thinking, "Is there a fire?" (As I've written in the past, in times of crisis, I get very calm, like a little "Bambi" hiding in the grass). I just went on singing and didn't say anything to Howard. I figured that if there WAS a fire, the alarm would go off. (I know, I know. If I had been on the Titanic, I would have just stayed in my room and gone back to sleep.)

Well, as the smoke got more dense, it began looking more like a mist or a fog seeping out of the wall. As it became very thick, a man, suddenly, stepped out from the wall.

It was then I thought to myself, "I didn't know Mark's apartment was haunted". But then it occurred to me it was a brand new building, so, in spite of what I was looking

at, the likelihood was rare. So THEN, I thought it might have had something to do with the mast of the Maine, just outside Mark's window.

The gentleman was dressed all in white, but he looked less like a sailor and more like he had just stepped off a tennis court.

He was an older fella (probably about the same age I am now ... "older"). He had gray/white hair and was attired in white tennis shorts, a white "polo" shirt and white socks and tennis shoes. He even had a white sweat band around his head. He stepped out of the mist for a second, looked at Howard and then the whole vision vanished.

I just kept on singing.

But, because it was in the middle of the day, I remember looking at the clock, thinking how odd something like that happened in broad daylight.

I never did say anything to Howard. I had learned over the years, sometimes folks aren't all that receptive to "stories" of this nature. Howard was a skeptical, pragmatic sort of guy ... and I simply didn't want to get into a "discussion" with him.

Anyway, afterward, I did try to figure out why it happened and what the connection was to Mark or the apartment.

However, I quickly came to find out, the connection was to Howard. I soon learned his father, who was suffering from cancer at the time, died in Florida at the same time Howard and I had been rehearsing. His dad was an avid tennis player who played right up until he could no longer manage it from the illness.

Had he been trying to say goodbye to his son? You never know.

So, there ya go. Hopefully my little tales will now put you in the mood for some Halloween fun. Granted, with the "plague" and the election, you don't need my stories to frighten you into a mood.

Actually, now that I think of it, this may be the scariest Halloween yet.

Funny how regular occurrences can be more frightening than the rare ones.

In the spirit (get it?),  
The Old Storyteller

## One last “Boo”

Before we let Halloween slip too far away, I thought I’d share a few Halloween memories that are not supernaturally related, but are a few good ol’, down to Earth “stuff and nonsense” rattling around my pea brain.

I was inspired by a Zoom Happy Hour call my darling Danny and I hosted for our church the other day. The virtual gathering was Halloween themed with folks telling their best or favorite memories about the holiday. A few of my brain cells were activated and this is what spewed forth:

I celebrated Halloween with “trick or treating” mostly in the 1960’s in my formative (and eager) years. Now, Halloween in upstate New York State was COLD! You have to consider, by the end of October, most of all the beautiful autumn New England leaves had hit the ground and we were already buried under snow and ice. Of course, the frigid weather was NEVER going to be an obstacle to ANY child in the midst of a frenzied candy fever.

(Not unlike the instinctual drive a salmon finds itself in as it is impelled to swim upstream to breed. Only, instead of perishing as the fish does after its purpose is accomplished, the “trick or treater” will spend a few days afterward in a delirious sugar coma; much more preferable than death. And certainly a whole less messier.)

There were many a Halloween night with snow on the ground. That meant we had to endure boots, coats, hats, scarves and gloves, which always obscured our carefully chosen costume! How frustrating! One snowy year, I was determined to force my new skeleton outfit over my snowsuit. It took a whole lot of shoving and cramming, and with the help of my long suffering mother, I did it! Oh sure, in my enthusiasm, it got torn in a few spots, but the damage didn’t effect the essential parts of the costume. I surmised it just added to the “haunted” cache of the ensemble.

We lived on the middle ground of a long, steep hill. My house was on Schermerhorn Road, which, to the left, went down the hill where no houses worth extorting for sweets existed. To the right, our road went horizontally across the hill into an older neighborhood. Near our home, Schermerhorn crossed Putnam Road which went straight up and down the hill. Up the hill, Putnam intersected with Gordon Road, on which was nestled a rich neighborhood of “Donna Reed” homes, all on large lots and filled to the brim with confections just waiting to be thrust into our desperate little hands.

Our regular Halloween routine was for our usual neighborhood friends of four to five kids to convene at our pals, the Wintergersts’ house just two houses away from us on Putnam, for soda and lots of photos. When we were ready to set out, without chaperones, hardly any street lamps and no flashlights, we would walk up the hill to a

few of homes where we didn't expect, nor ever received, a whole lot of treats. Those families were friends of the Wintergersts, so we were obligated to make a stop. We would, then, walk back down Putnam, passing those just visited homes that were not worth ransacking, to Schermerhorn. There, we would stare at Mrs. Simone's house and debate whether to even bother to knock.

You see, Mrs. Simone was almost 100 years old. She was a tiny, stooped Italian lady with thin, white hair tied back in a bun. She lived in the first floor of what had been a small hotel that her husband built to service the passengers traveling on the Erie Canal, of which the ruined remains sat at the bottom of Putnam hill, not too far from the hotel. The Simone's hotel had long ago been converted into apartments, which my family had rented for a while. However, by the 1960's, the building was falling apart and the paying tenants had long moved away. All that remained was Mrs. Simone and her CRANKY, unmarried son, Joey (whom we shall ignore in this reverie.)

Mrs. Simone was so aged, we knew she never had a clue it was Halloween. So, if we decided to visit her, it was always a crap shoot as to what we would get as our "treat". Based on past experience, we knew she would feel badly if she found out Halloween came and went and we didn't visit her. So, because she was such a dear person, we almost always knocked.

Most often, when we did make the gesture, she would get all flustered she didn't have anything for us. That said, she almost always found an apple or banana to donate. There were a few times she had Italian cookies, sprinkled with tons of powdered sugar, that we loved. But there was one Halloween, she had absolutely nothing. She was so upset. We kept saying, "That's okay, Mrs. Simone! Don't worry about it! We just wanted to wish you a Happy Halloween". But then, she happily thought of something she could hand out. She sweetly gave one to each of us. That night, everyone left her house with a raw potato.

After Mrs. Simone's, we would cross Putnam, staying on Schermerhorn and "do" the six homes over there. However, we never approached, much less went in front of Mr. Van Vranken's house. He was one of those scary, old codgers every neighborhood has. Throughout the year, he would yell at us for one thing or another. So we knew his was a true house of horrors that was to be avoided at all costs.

Walking back to the corner of Putnam and Schermerhorn, there was one house on the hill that was on Simone Road. (Yes, named after Mr. and Mrs. Simone). Simone Road was a tiny shortcut of a lane that began at that corner and went on a diagonal up the hill to the aforementioned Gordon Road. The Campbells lived there. Sometimes their son, Johnny, would trick or treat with us. On those occasions, we would take Simone Road to Johnny Campbell's house and get rewarded with lots of candy and the obligatory posing for tons of pictures.

It was from there we, AT LAST, reached the “El Dorado” of candy treasure: Gordon Road.

We would turn right, and cross the parking lot of the fire house my mother’s father helped to build. And there, spread out in front of us was the horn-of-plenty of sweets. We would unabashedly run from one house to the next; picking a few houses on one side of the road, then dashing across the street to a few homes on the other. Each time, thanking our “dealers”, then rushing off. Of course, we weren’t the only kids getting our “fix”. There were, what seemed, hundreds of children in various states of Halloween wear doing the same thing as we. Actually, it sometimes was overwhelming. I, actually, became impatient if I had to wait for another group to finish in front of us, and wasn’t shy about articulating my frustration.

This was a war zone, baby! Survival of the fittest!

When we completed our tour of duty on Gordon Road, we turned onto Viewland Avenue. We never went farther down Gordon, because, it went over a railroad bridge and continued up a VERY steep incline. We wanted candy, but, by that time, our energies were fairly well spent. We didn’t want to work THAT hard for it. And besides, my mother’s mother, my Grammie, lived on Viewland.

We would drag our, now, heavily laden bags to the few houses on Grammie’s side of the road, never crossing to the other side, all the more faster, to get to the sanctity of my grandmother’s home. By the time we crossed her threshold, we were freezing and exhausted.

Grammie was always there waiting with hot chocolate and homemade, Tollhouse chocolate chip cookies to soothe our weary bodies. She also had her “Brownie” camera ready and at her side with which to take even more pictures. Pa, my grandfather, was there, as well, but he usually just stayed in his armchair watching television. We would get ushered into the living room by my grandmother, where he’d laugh at us, then we’d get ushered back into the kitchen for more cookies and photos.

After we warmed up enough and had all used the toilet (except the year I had my skeleton costume over my snowsuit ... there was no WAY that was coming off until I got home!), we kids set off again to go back to our houses.

Once in a while, my dad would meet us at Grammie’s and Pa’s and drive us back. But more often than not, we would take a “secret” walking path down the wooded bluff behind my grandmother’s house that led to, none other than, Schermerhorn Road. It was pitch black in that area. But we all knew that trail so well, we could travel it with our eyes closed and not kill ourselves.

After leaving the trail, we walked down the middle of the Schermerhorn Road in the dark. We were wary of two houses near each other that we had to pass.

One was the deserted brick house where, a few years before, a father, in a drunken rage, had brought home a shotgun one night in order to murder his family. The man woke everyone in the house and gathered them in the living room. But before he could do anything awful, his son grappled with the father to get the gun away from him. After a struggle, the son shot and killed his father. No one else was hurt. The rumor around the neighborhood was that the place was haunted by the dead father.

We loved the spirit Halloween. But not for THAT kind of spirit!

We quickly moved on.

But the truly scary house we had to pass in order to get to our homes was just beyond the brick house: Mr. Van Vranken's! But now we approached it from the opposite side from where we were earlier in the evening. We had to remain painfully quiet, trying not to laugh out of nervousness, in order to get by without giving ourselves away. With all the candy we were lugging, if he had come out, we certainly couldn't run very fast.

Anyway, after the long adventure, my brothers and I got home and were able to peel off what was left of our costumes, along with the boots, snowsuits, coats, hats, scarves and gloves. We were all a-tremble, not from the cold, but from the anticipation of seeing what booty we had acquired.

However, my mother was ruler of the roost. Nothing was going into my or my brothers' mouths until it passed her inspection. Our treasures would be dumped out on the kitchen table one bag at a time (lawd forbid our candy should get mixed with our siblings') and she would carefully, sort through it. Sadly, Mrs. Simone's apple (or potato) would get tossed out. She would, then, place the just sorted pile of candy into each child's own mixing bowl; with one caveat. She would get to choose a candy bar for herself. I really wouldn't have minded so much, but mommy and I had the same "taste" in candy; we both loved coconut. And, darn it, she would always take my Mounds bar! ("I was the one who did the work. It didn't seem FAIR!") But I knew not to put up a fuss.

Putting things in the proper mindset, I still had a bowl full of candy and a whole lot of good memories.

Well, as I have learned, sometimes life isn't fair. And sometimes it is filled with scary stuff, real or imagined. The realness of Halloween 2020 with COVID-19 and the imagined terrors of our election process are proof of that.

We just need to remember to sweeten this "pot" we live in with some good thoughts, a lotta love and warming memories of happy times. That should help us get some perspective. And your favorite candy bar will help as well.

Looking toward more good times,  
The Candy Man

## A matter of perspective

In all the months I have been typing out this blog-thing, I have bent over backwards to avoid any mention of politics. And, let me tell ya, bending over backwards, much less typing while I am doing so, ain't easy for someone of my age. As the 2020 election season popped like a unwanted pimple, my efforts to remain closed-mouth became even more laborious. Heck, my "backwards bend" became a full out Olympic gymnastics floor routine.

However, rest assured, dear reader, in spite of my metaphorical back flips and double twists, my closed-mouth-ed-ness shall continue. Why? Because I want to remain on neutral ground when it comes to this writin' stuff. I so respect and love all my friends and family who have a completely opposite view on national matters for me, it wouldn't be tasteful for me to foist any untoward opinions in their faces. Just, as I know, they would attempt the same non-foisting in my direction.

That said, the issue still remains, why do we have such differing views in the first place? Eliminating all the talking heads, rabid social media and annoying commercials, we all still have these opposite opinions that cause consternation and confusion to those of diametrically opposing outlooks.

So, what up?

I have been musing on this and have come to the over-simplified conclusion that it is all a matter of perspective.

Where does one's perspective come from? Well, mommies and daddies for one. The social environment you were brought up in is another source. We are all born innocent ... that is except for the occasional sociopath or pathological liar (NO politics here; just citing examples). From the day we were born, we are influenced by our parents. Sometimes we grow in lockstep with their views and sometimes we boomerang so far away from their thinking, they become convinced their child got switched with some other babe in the hospital. Either way, those little brain creases are being formed at a very early age and become quite difficult to flatten out later on in life.

Where and with who/whom we grow up is also a huge influence. For example, if you grow up in a hippie commune in the mountains of California, the likelihood of you becoming a high-powered New York stock broker in your adult life is fairly remote. You've been taught different values. On the other hand, if you grow up in Germany with the rise of Hitler and know nothing other than the Nazi "way", are you to be blamed for joining the military machine to defend your family, country and ... well ... you know who? It doesn't make it right. It doesn't make it even acceptable. But it does make it understandable why that ex-flower child or SS sergeant think the way they do.

Look. I am no professional when it comes to the analysis of the human mind. But I can observe behavior and take a wild stab at the wherefores of why that person thinks or acts that way.

Even so, as smug as I am about thinking I understand the human Id and Ego, I'm still shocked when our differences are smack in front of me.

During the mid-Eighties, while I was still living in New York City, I was riding the subway under mid-town Manhattan. It was the afternoon of a Saint Patrick's Day. At one station, the doors opened to a loud cacophony. Suddenly, a group of very obviously drunk college-aged guys piled into the subway car. They brought their "party" with them. They were yelling and harassing the riders with unabashed volatility. Thank goodness for me, they remained on the opposite end of the car from where I was sitting because I felt truly threatened. As they were carrying on, I caught the eye of the woman sitting next to me. She was probably around fifty-ish. She was very well dressed, in a Chanel-type suit and was perfectly coifed and put together. When our eyes met, we both made a bit of a funny face as to wordlessly comment on what was happening on the other end of the car. After about six stops, the "boys" got off and we all seemed to breath a sigh of relief. It was then I turned to the woman and said, "Wasn't that something?" She replied, "Yes! They looked like they were having so much fun!"

"WHAT?!?!?!?!?"

Here I was thinking this person was of the same mind as me, even when we exchanged looks, she but was actually thinking the polar opposite! I was stunned.

But, here I get back to my point of perspective. To me, these guys represented the bullies I encountered in my formative years. From my point of view, they were a threat to my well-being. To her, they probably represented memories her family or friends after a lacrosse or rugby match who were all hyped up and celebrating a victory. Obviously, our perspectives were completely different. It was my profound error in assuming we thought the same thing.

I was so naive.

The idea of perspective also brings to mind something my darling Danny and I went through in our first years together and sometimes still do to this day. In, I'd say, the first seven or so years together, as we were getting to know the ins and outs of each other, we kept having these "skirmishes". The best way I can describe them is in this way:

We would be discussing a table (for example). He would say, "The table is flat. The table is flat." And I would be saying, "The table is round. The table is round." OF COURSE, we'd be talking about the exact same thing, only coming at it from two different viewpoints. In the beginning, it would escalate and we would get angry at each

other. Now-a-days, (most of the time ... cough!) we just laugh at ourselves and recognize we are “doing it again”.

Look, I don't see people's perspectives changing any time soon. At this point of the game, we are all fairly well “dug in” in our mindsets. As individuals, we are what we are. BUT, the way we approach the differences could possibly be tweaked! Maybe what we need to do in this country is recognize we are “doing it again” and laugh at ourselves.

Wouldn't that be a much nicer solution?

Just a thought,

Your Two-Bit Peace Maker

## Playing nice

When I was a kid ... I liked to play with dolls.

I know that won't come as a huge surprise. However, to be more specific, I liked to play with the dolls' clothes.

I sure as heck was never the maternal type. Baby dolls or the ones that uttered "mama" left me cold. Although, I confess, I was somewhat interested in how those enigmatic "mama" doll devices worked. I never ripped open the back of any of my friends' dollies, but I was tempted.

I was a good boy.

But, when it came to a fashion doll, like the goddess icon, Barbie, herself, I was mesmerized. The textures and colors of her clothes were hypnotic to me; not to mention how the outfits were actually constructed.

I suppose this comes from the fact that I have a brain that loves to solve puzzles. All the toys with which I played, stimulated that part of my mind. Building sets like Lego or Lincoln Logs were de rigueur. Or even better, Skyline.

Does anyone remember Skyline sets? They allowed the user to make buildings or bridges out of a MILLION little white pieces of plastic that represented walls, foundations or stairs.

LOVED. IT.

That is, except when I had to dismantle everything and put it all away. Because of my anal-retentive need to sort every piece out and put it in its proper storage spot, it would take me, what seemed like, HOURS. Well, I suppose that was part of the expected playtime of a child with OCD.

I also loved games like "Mouse Trap" or "Crazy Clock". These were board games in which one rolled the dice and, by landing on the proper spot, was rewarded by a piece of plastic that you would get to place into a 3-D Rube Goldberg-type structure. The winner of the game would have the privilege of triggering the completed "machine".

In addition, there were toys where the kid could make something out of nothing. These were "Creepy Crawlers" or "Creepie People" where you poured a liquid plastic into molds and heated them over hot electrical units until the plastic solidified.

(Can you imagine a toy with a serious heating device being produced these days? The toy manufacturers would be spending most of their budgets fending off lawsuits!)

But my very favorite toy was the Barbie doll. Of course, the problem with that was, in the 1960's, a male child would NEVER be given a toy created strictly for a girl. It was absolutely verboten by society. Therefore, I needed to expand my child's puzzle brain and figure out how I could get one in my little hands.

That was where the kindness (or naïveté) of my friends came in.

First, it was Shelly, who was my age and lived across the road from my Grammie. We didn't have a lot in common, other than being in the same class and her living so close to my grandparents. In our early friendship, one December, she invited me over to look at her Christmas presents. Of course, being 1962 (or so), she was given a complete Pony-tail Barbie Black Carrying Case with clothes, which included the black, sparkly "Solo in the Spotlight" dress with pink, satin stole and accompanying microphone stand.

Dreamy.

I was completely hooked. From that moment, whenever I would walk up the hill to visit my Grammie, and after our CocaColas and homemade Tollhouse chocolate chip cookies, I would run off to play with Shelly. Shelly always seemed happy to see me, even when I spent more attention to her dolls than to her. However, she finally got wise to my behavior and not-so-subtly let me know of her displeasure.

Shelly had made some great paper dolls imitating the fashions of her Barbie. I was so enamored by what she did, I ripped off her idea and made the exact same paper dolls. When I showed her the ones I made, she took everything I had done and ripped them to pieces in front of me.

I intuited that was the end of our friendship.

Unfortunately, I still needed to feed my "habit"

With great fortune, one of my very best friends in the world was a girl who lived just up the road from me: Pam Wintergerst. Pam's household was like a second family to me. Her brother, Peter, was my best neighborhood friend and her younger sister, Linda, was always part of our fun.

However, Pam and I had a lot in common. We were both curious about how things worked and loved to invent situations that would make us laugh. We both enjoyed making things out of nothing ... and we both loved Barbies. Because Pam and I reveled in each other's company, unlike with Shelly, our Barbie-play was comprised of mutual happily creative scenarios. And it always would involve the need for Barbie to change her clothes. I loved that!

Now, Pam's parents grew up in Germany in the Thirties and Forties. Although they were very loving people, they tended to be on the conservative side of the spectrum. When Pam and I played together, we were always in her room with the door closed. However, every once in a while, her father would open the door to tell her something. If, on such an occasion, we were in the middle of our Barbie fantasy, her Teutonic father would just look at me with the doll in my hands and sadly, shake his head, closing the door behind him.

He was a good guy.

But, even though I could never achieve the dream of my own personal Barbie, I did manage to assuage my longings by begging and pleading my long suffering mother into buying me a troll doll.

Troll dolls were the big fad in the Sixties. You probably have seen them. In general, they were little figures about 4 to 6 inches tall made of pliable plastic. Their little arms and legs were splayed open as if about to hug someone. And they all had long, colorful hair that stood straight up. Mine was a blonde. I chose it because it had the longest hair.

It (she?) became my facsimile Barbie. I made clothes for her. The outfits were made from any scraps of fabric or yarn I could find. I even regularly washed and styled the hair to match each new ensemble. Although, I got stuck on a Marlo Thomas hairdo from "That Girl" that I created and didn't change for weeks. Once, I manipulated the hairpiece so much, that the whole thing came unfastened from the body and popped out into my hands. The hair was glued to a piece of heavy duty felt. When that happened, I just completed my stylings without the rest of the doll and smushed the hair back into the head. No harm done!

However, when it came time to be a "grownup", I had trouble leaving my troll with my other toys. I kept it on my shelf for years, even after my parents moved to another house in 1972 just as I went off to college.

But finally, all good things had to come to an end. Before I permanently moved away from home in 1977, I found a small box just the right size to fit my little troll doll. I padded it with cotton and fabric and carefully laid her in it along with the little outfits I made. I then slid on the lid and said a few words of thanks and farewell.

She is still interred in my trunk here in Tucson.

I know I was an unusual child. But I don't regret my fascination with anything creative or beautiful. It certainly helped me in my adult life.

I worked my way through college getting paid doing "work-study" in the Theatre Department's costume shop.

After my darling Danny and I got together, even though he required male attire, I made many of his clothes. I, also, sewed all the curtains in our DC house.

To this day, I occasionally sew clothing for children our church sponsors in equatorial Africa.

And it all tracks back to my love of the fashion from a forbidden doll named Barbie.

One never knows where lifelong inspiration will come from.

Creatively,  
Barbie's stylish friend

## High on life

I just got back from applying for a “Medical Marijuana” I.D. card. Apparently, I am about to become a legal pot head. This is out of necessity, of course, all because of a need for relief of pain from my seemingly unending list of maladies.

As I have written in the past, I am a delicate flower. I happen to be one of those people who is allergic to ALL opioids. For me, no morphine, codeine, Oxycodone or, that recreational drug of choice, heroin. They all cause a range of symptoms from loss of consciousness and seizures to uncontrollable paranoia. Not fun, I assure you. Although, from my lack of use, I can't be absolutely sure about the heroin, but I can assume.

The genetic predisposition seems to come from my long suffering mother's side of the tree. My Grammie nor my mother nor my older brother nor many of my nieces and nephews could/can imbibe without some crazy physical reaction happening. Sneaking in any of that “baby's first opioid” stuff isn't helpful either. Tramadol causes some pretty “trama”-tic reactions. (Oh sure! Easy for me to make light of the subject!) I suppose, one could say the good thing about being allergic to opioids is one will never be an addict.

Oh. Yay.

The BAD thing about the concept is ... when the medical “they” want to prescribe a pain killer for you when you are in agony from something like ... ohhhh, let's say KIDNEY STONES ... “they” are at a loss for what to give you as an alternative protocol.

(I learned that “protocol” is the word medical professionals refer to when identifying a procedure or treatment. I also learned I have been involved with medical professionals WAAAAAY too often.)

Anyway, after my last foray into the world of extreme discomfort and being given a Tylenol for my kindey stone (which is like putting a Bandaid on a severed limb), I decided to find another kind of “protocol” on my own.

A while back, my friend Bonnie, who suffers from a crazy amount of pain, either self-inflicted (ie - falling off her horse) or medically created, went out and got herself a “Medical Marijuana” I.D. card from the state of Arizona. It allows her to attain said product from any one of several dispensaries in and around Tucson. The chemical effects of the THC and CBD from the marijuana helps to put herself in another kind of “state”, other than Arizona. She suggested I apply for a card as an alternative route to a pain-free existence.

Now, I am a big WEEENIE when it comes to the partaking of drugs of ANY kind; prescription OR recreational. I confess, in my wanton years in the Eighties, when I lived

in Manhattan, I puffed a doobie or three. However, because I reacted so excessively to any mind-altering material I stuck in my pie-hole, I would always have to stay mightily close to home, lest my reeling and swaying got me in more trouble than simply using an illegal substance. I would lose complete control, even with the tiniest toke.

(See how hip and groovy I am by throwing around my marijuana lingo?)

Back to the present ...

BeCAUSE I am keenly aware of the history of my physical reactions to the use of “Mary Jane” (how was THAT reference?), I have been hesitant to go down that weeded path. But I’ve finally reached the breaking point on how much misery I can endure. Enough is enough already!

So, with that in mind and the guidance of my primary care doc (a VERY smart, sensitive AND quite nice woman), I found myself in the NatureMedica office; a facility that would be my guide into the world of formerly illegal substances. NatureMedica has been around for many years as a venue for alternative medical therapies; acupuncture, massage, etc. But, when medical marijuana became legal in Arizona, they were the folks you went to in order to get your aforementioned Arizona State Medical Marijuana I.D. card.

(The experience was kind-a like getting a driver’s license, except there were a LOT less people around and the office was a whole bunch cleaner.)

The great (and, to me, surprising) aspect of applying is that you are evaluated by a real live doctor. (As opposed to a real dead doctor ... but they wouldn’t be much help if they were in that condition, now would they?)

Anywho, I was evaluated and approved! I tried not to take it personally when the doctor told me I was MORE THAN QUALIFIED to secure an I.D. Her emphasis on “MORE THAN QUALIFIED” seemed a bit fervent.

So NOW, after achieving my card, I still need to find a dispensary. The NatureMedica doc told me to request an appointment with the doctor the dispensary has on site. That was because, nowadays, there are SO many options for types of marijuana from which to choose. It no longer is about that funny smelling smoke you detect when you walk pass a group of ne’er-do-wells on the street.

Which reminds me of a story ...

When my darling Danny and I lived in DC, we owned a rowhouse that shared walls on both sides. At one point, the landlord of one of the neighboring houses began renting out to Howard University students. Soon, Danny and I began smelling this AWFUL odor that was seeping through the walls at night. It could only be described as having been “sprayed” by a skunk. At first we were annoyed, but then we became alarmed as we got thinking they might have been making illegal substances. We didn’t

know if we were in danger from the noxious chemicals coming through the wall. It certainly became concerning.

Anyway, Danny and I owned a little cabin in the woods on top of a mountain in West Virginia. We would drive out every other weekend or so in order to get away from it all. One evening, as we were toodling down the highway, we were overcome by the distinct and overpowering stink of a skunk. At the same time, we both yelled out, "That's the smell!" It reeked exactly the same as what we had been experiencing. Danny said, "Look up drugs that smell like skunk". Wouldn't you know, when I Googled it on my phone, there was a whole article from The Chicago Tribune about that very same thing. Apparently, animal control had been called to an apartment building several times with the complaint of a skunk being loose in the building. It turned out, it was teens smoking a new kind of potent marijuana called "skunk weed". It was called that because ... well ... it smelled like SKUNK! THAT'S what our young neighbors had been partaking in all that time!

Who knew things had come so far since my days in Manhattan back in the Eighties?

Presently, it is my understanding, there are hundreds of different varieties of said plant, with all different strengths and all different ways you can ingest them! So I KNOW I am going to need some guidance.

I have decided, no smoking for me. My lungs are stupid enough without something making them stupider. I wouldn't mind a brownie or two, but with my gluten intolerance and the need for sugar free products, a little chocolate treat is out of the picture. I guess I will just have to utilize a small tincture of a little "sumpthin', sumpthin'" of marijuana oil, but I will need to wait to see what the doctor at the dispensary says.

In this most recent election, Arizonans voted to legalize recreational marijuana use in the home. I suppose, I could have saved myself a whole lot of trouble and simply waited a few months in order to take advantage of the new law. But, something about going to my friendly neighborhood dispensary has so much more of an appeal. It's like purchasing a steak with a USDA seal of approval at a high end grocery store as opposed to buying one in the dead of night off the back of a truck.

Meanwhile, I am hoping I won't ever have to use the stuff. That's because I plan never to have a kidney stone ever again ... EV-AH! But, back to reality ... when push comes to shove and I DO need to utilize my newly acquired drug of choice, when you read about me in the papers reeling and swaying through the streets of Tucson, you'll know I am just in the midst of fending off some annoying misery. But, trust me, I sure as HECK am NOT gonna be smelling like no skunk. I have my limits.

Groovy baby,  
Abbie Hoffman

## My long suffering mother

Over the course of time, as I have been making observations under your watchful eyes about the life I have been living out, I have been asked, on a few occasions, why I refer to my parents as “my poor father” and “my long suffering mother”. I usually answered these inquiries privately because, to tell the truth, the answers for both are generally not funny and are actually heartbreaking. I didn’t think my replies were appropriate fodder for my generally light-hearted reflections.

Both my parents lived out their lives with a bit of Shakespearean tragedy tagging along in their wake. Failed dreams, illegitimate birth and madness are just a few of the scenarios that played out.

Recently, my sister-in-law, Dee, asked me about the monikers I assigned to them. I said I would answer her with the caveat of “it really isn’t anything I want to talk about in public. And it certainly isn’t anything to laugh about.”

However, with that said, an odd coincidence occurred soon after I wrote back to her. (Is anything REALLY a coincidence?) I stumbled upon two small desktop size calendars, each with a spiral binding that I had given to my parents in 1995 for Christmas. The shiny, vinyl cover of each is titled “Share Your Life With Me”. One calendar cover has a large “Mom” printed on it and the other has “Dad”. Inside, each calendar day had a printed question asking for some personal memory or information regarding their early years. Inquiries such as “Who was your favorite teacher?” or “Tell of a childhood illness”; along with requests for birth dates and important holidays. The bulk of every page was blank in order for them to write their answers. Which they did. Many of my poor father’s answers were flip or inappropriate. However, my long suffering mother was quite earnest in how she answered.

As I am one not to take coincidences lightly, I took my sudden discovery of these calendars, so soon after Dee’s asking, to be an “okay” from the great beyond to go ahead and do a big “reveal”.

So, with some trepidation, here are their stories.

I am going to begin with my mother. My next writing will “cover” my dad.

Before I proceed, though, I really want to give you a heads-up that these biographic remembrances will not always be pleasant. If you are looking for the usual chuckle, it ain’t happening’ here. Feel free to skip this and Friday’s blog-things. And I’ll “see” ya next week.

Throughout my mother’s life, circumstances occurred that never really allowed her to be her own person. She even told me she felt she lived a life unfulfilled.

In reflection, I agree.

My mother was born Ruth Marion Smith in Schenectady, NY on April 28, 1928. (I always thought, as “ethnic” as I turned out, it was “funny” my mother’s maiden name was Smith.)

She was named Ruth, because her father wanted to name her Sophronia after his mother. But my grandmother balked saying, “No way my daughter is going to be Sophie Smith”. Ruth was the first name of (who turned out to be) one of my mother’s favorite aunts.

My mother was the first of three girls. No boys; my grandmother had two failed pregnancies. My mother said she always felt her father made her feel “inadequate” because she wasn’t a boy.

Mommy was smart; I mean REALLY smart. She also was rebellious. I think it was because of her intelligence. If she did something that was perceived as being wrong, she would make attempts to reason with whomever was disciplining her in order to explain her purpose.

Unfortunately for my mother, that person was usually her father. He was short tempered and could be a disciplinarian to the point of being a brute. She was often beaten (strong word, but accurate) because she was “sassing” or “talking back”. Her independent spirit and natural inquisitiveness was quashed very early on due the dominance and control of her father. Her mother was a sweet woman, but my mother’s natural independence pushed the limits with her as well.

My mother needed attention, but not the way she received it from her father.

She had a lovely soprano voice. Although no one else in her immediate family (except her sister Lee) was musical, she could find positive feedback from her family and peers with her solo work at church. Church was where she found pride in something she could do well. It was there she also began to learn how to play the piano.

To be fair, there were other good times and parental generosity as well. Early on, on one Christmas, her parents made a home-made crib and baby clothes for my mother’s favorite doll. Her mother was a GREAT cook and Ruthie found herself often being rewarded with her mother’s treats.

Even so, she said she remembers that things went well at home as long as she bent to the will of my grandfather. Anything out-of-line and she was truly punished.

My mother found solace in books. She could read an entire book in one day. She did that her whole life: a book a day. Growing up, she liked to hide in some lilac bushes where no one could find her in order to be isolated with her reading. She wrote that the happiest times in her life was when she could be left alone with her books.

When my mother was just starting seventh grade, the principal came to her house to speak to her parents. Ruthie had been “acting up” in school by damaging the

school books she was reading. It turned out she was bored (which she said she was), so they all agreed to skip her ahead TWO grades.

This created an entirely new set of problems that further isolated her. She was taken away from the few friends she had and was “set down” in the middle of a group of freshmen who were two years older than her. They were talking about having dates while she was still playing with dolls. That alone caused her to be ostracized by her classmates. But because of her incessant reading, with the addition of a sudden ballooning of her weight in those years, she was pushed to be even more forsaken. That isolation followed her through all the rest of her life. From all that was happening to her at home and at school, she became a loner out of necessity simply to “survive”.

In school, however, her singing brought her some solace and her intelligent mind eventually brought her some needed respect.

As she was completing high school, her father insisted she get a job. Her typing skills were so exemplary and her smarts were such an asset, she got a job as a file clerk/secretary for the government during WWII. She was cleared for top secret documents ... the kind that came into her office in a briefcase attached to the chained wrist of a military attaché. Her department was Radio and Radar Countermeasures. She remembers working on papers involving improved radar. In addition, she typed out countermeasures for dropping strips of aluminum out of a plane to jam the enemy radar.

But once the war was over, so was her job.

Her dream was to become a high school English teacher. However her mother and father wanted her to become a nurse. So, bowing to their wishes, she used the meager savings she had accrued from her government job to put herself through nursing school.

She recalls her mother sneaking her some “house money” her mother had saved in order to help with the day-to-day nursing school expenses. I say “sneaking” because her father thought extra money was not necessary.

Even though she began nursing school in Schenectady, she eventually needed to transfer to a hospital in New York City in order to complete her training.

For the first time in her life, she was out from under the thumb of her father. While she lived at home, she had to go to bed at 7:30 every night! Now, she was free to stay up as long as she wanted and experience a life she had only dreamed of.

Nursing school was hard on her body, but not on her mind. My mother excelled in her studies. As long as she avoided one particularly rigid head nurse, she got a taste of true independence and self-will.

It was in that state of mind, she returned home after her schooling.

It was not good.

Her father and she seemed to butt heads with every encounter they had with each other. She was too old for him to hit her, but he did his best to intimidate her.

She was able to get a job at a high-end “nursing home” her Aunt Louise had worked at. It was a combination nursing home/mental health hospital and seemed like a good opportunity ... until the worst possible of things happened.

She was raped.

While my mother was hosing down a shower room used by the nurses, she was confronted and raped by an orderly.

In those days, in the early 1950's, in most cases, it was always considered to be the woman's fault of sexual aggression. The female was “enticing” the male who couldn't help himself. In spite of her attempts to report what happened to anyone in charge, her complaints was tamped down and was told to be quiet. The hospital authorities were more concerned with their status than her outrage.

So she quit.

And then she had to face her father.

One's own imagination can picture the ensuing confrontation better than my writing can. So I will leave it at that.

Or I WISH I could leave it at that.

The rape left her pregnant.

It was 1952. This was a time where society so much abhorred an unwed mother, the actress Ingrid Bergman was forced to leave the U.S.A. when it was revealed she was having twins with her married lover.

My mother now had that stigma permanently attached to her; by society, her family and with her own self-loathing.

When the pregnancy was revealed, her father went berserk and her mother wept. They blamed her. If ever my mother felt isolated and shunned, this was its pinnacle.

Her surly Uncle Ward and her Aunt Louise, who had helped get her the job in the first place, owned, what we would now call, a bed and breakfast in the mountains of New Hampshire. When my mother began “showing”, she was sent to my Aunt Louise's inn. She stayed a few months, helping with the chores until it was time for her to give birth.

She was then shuffled off to a “home for indigent women” in Albany, NY which was run by the Catholic Church. She told me the nuns there treated her like dirt. Because of that, even though my mother was baptized Catholic, she never again stepped foot in a Catholic Church.

She gave birth to a boy.

However, to make matters even more complicated than they had been, the child was born with part of his intestines outside of the body. Now she needed to pay for the

operation that the Catholics were not going to financially help her with. As a result, ANY money she saved was used, plus she had to ask her parents for a loan. They relented. But she knew what the terms would be before she asked. Her father made it clear she was indebted to him.

After the procedure, the nuns and her parents made her give the child up for adoption. Once the papers were signed, she never saw or heard of him again.

She once told me, if, as an adult, he came knocking on her door, she would deny any attachment. But, I think she was just saying that out of deep hurt and remorse. I think she would have cried and given him a hug.

But that never happened.

After the adoption was over, she went back to living with her parents.

She was able to secure a nursing job at Ellis Hospital, the largest hospital in Schenectady. She began as an “alternate floor nurse” where she was assigned a different floor to work each time she went in. But because of her quick mind and willingness to help, she quickly was moved into the operating room where she stayed until almost to the end of her twenty year career.

My poor father and she had been acquaintances through high school. He was two years older, but because she had skipped forward two years, they were in the same class. She knew him as a loud mouth and a jokester and never took him seriously. But after she was back at work, they bumped into each other by chance and kindled a friendship. He would sometimes pick her up after a shift and take her home. It was then she realized he was a lot “deeper” than she thought. They had some good talks about “life” and the “universe” and quietly slipped into a courtship.

One night, while she was working, he called her to say he was in the parking lot and to go downstairs to meet him. On her break, she went down and sat in the car with him. He handed her a small box and said, “Will you take this?” It was a diamond. She said yes, they kissed and then dad practically shoved her out of the car.

To my mother, it wasn’t romantic, but it was a miracle. Not only had someone asked a “fallen woman” for her hand, she would finally be able to get out from under her father’s authority.

They were married July 19, 1952. My mother wore blue. She designed the dress and had it made. (I still have the dress.)

I wish I could now say, “... and they all lived happily ever after”. But my mother’s saga didn’t end there. The black cloud she was born under did not dissipate with the advent of a wedding.

Unknown to her, my father had a mental illness that would plague them both all their days together.

Out of the frying pan, into the fire.

He has obsessive/compulsive disorder so badly that, twice in his life, he had to be formerly institutionalized for treatment; once, after I was born in 1954 and once after his mother died in 1968. But that is my dad's story.

Her new mother-in-law did not like her; not only was she taking away "her boy", that "boy" was marrying a woman with a reputation.

From my mother's perspective, she had married a mama's boy who never had to fend for himself. Because he had been so doted on, he didn't know how to do ANY household tasks, including paying the bills. When he got upset, he froze and shut down. Or tried to pretend nothing was wrong.

It all fell to my mother.

He eventually did learn how to do the laundry and he mowed the yard. But the running of the house was all on the shoulders of my mother.

To add insult to injury, when my father was "normal", he teased her incessantly. She HATED to be teased. It was a torture that was deeply rooted from her childhood. Not only did she bear the torment of her day-to-day life, the feeling was exasperated by my father's digs at her. If he thought he was being funny, it was insensitive.

The romantic, storybook notion of a hero carrying her away quickly turned into the drudgery of caring for three boys and a man-child.

She really tried to make the best of it. We always had great birthdays and holidays. And even though my dad hated to travel (it caused his anxieties to rise) she made sure we always had a summer vacation.

And she called me Sunshine.

We learned discipline from her and was grateful for the stable life she, alone, forged.

However, that, too took its toll. She had a hair-trigger temper. Her wits and her wrath were things we kids grew to fear. But, on the other hand, she could be funny and generous with no strings attached.

Sadly, she was continually plagued with mishaps. I remember, for a time, she had convinced my father to go square dancing. However, on one occasion, she fell while dancing and broke a vertebrae. She had to wear a back brace for years. She suffered the pain even as she had to go back to work and lean over an operating table for hours.

Time passed and we two older boys were moving away. She started having empty nest syndrome and began drinking heavily. Money was tight, her husband was no help and she was feeling abandoned.

(My poor brother Mike was still at home watching this house of cards crumble.)

It came to a fruition when she had her first heart attack. It was in the mid-1970's and she was only in her forties. I suppose the stresses, her drinking and, at that time, heavy smoking took its toll.

However, when that occurred, it seemed to be a “wake up call” for both my mother and father. She stopped drinking (for the most part) and stopped smoking cold turkey. Dad finally decided to take on more responsibility and truly began to tend to her needs.

Mike joined the Army and moved away.

It was now just them.

She retired on disability and dad retired, eventually on his meager Social Security. That’s the way they lived for decades. They slept in different rooms and only came together at supper time. They lived their lives together apart.

However, my mother’s health worsened from her weak heart and pain from severe osteoporosis. Her books could no longer help her “escape”. After a move to New Jersey to be near Mike, his wife Alicia and seven grandchildren, her unfulfilled life story looked as if it was fairly well over.

That is, until she fell in her apartment, then was moved directly from a hospital into the nursing home.

Suddenly, she seemed happy. She no longer had to worry about the household. People were taking care of her! She went from being a loner to teaching Bible classes and crocheting to the other residents! She even sat on a “board” formed by the residents who lived in her wing! She also “adopted” an 100-year-old woman she shared a room with and looked after her as though my mother was her nurse.

We sons kept saying, “Where is my mother and what have you done with her?” And she had her own little corner by a window where she could be alone with her books.

She finally seemed content.

She died in her sleep of what we assume was an aortic aneurism. Although diagnosed a few years before, because of my mother’s frailty, was never surgically attended to.

It was Memorial Day 2008. She was 80.

Although she had a life of unfulfilled dreams and much too much suffering, she always said that going to my performances and seeing my success brought her joy. As her son, making my mother happy in anyway I could always made me feel as though I was filling an needed emotional void for her.

Although, truth be told, her final year in the nursing home really seemed to make her happy and, at long last, bring her some relief.

The last time I saw my mother was on her birthday, one month before she died. I sat next to her and sang a song called “Mama a Rainbow”. It’s about a son wishing all the most beautiful and precious things in the universe for his mother in order to bring her peace.

It was all about love.

I miss you Mommy,  
Sunshine

ps - A few more mommy mem'ries

I have had such an enormous response to my memoir of my mother, I wanted to add this short post script. I felt the need to "fill in the blanks" in order to give a fuller picture of Ruth as a person.

Her day-to-day routine was not steeped in darkness and misery. She did eke out a life that made her content; bringing some sanity to her world.

Here are a bunch of remembrances of small things that did make her happy:

- Her favorite routine was to come home from work, take a hot shower and cover herself with Jean Nate After Bath Powder. She would, then, don her nightgown and sit in her bed, propped up by several pillows. Even after she retired, she would follow the same pattern every day.

- She liked to have her bedroom at a freezing temperature. Her room was the first in our house to get an air conditioning unit. But, in the winter, she always slept with the window open. (This is in upstate New York!)

- Speaking of freezing, she liked ice; a lot of it. She would use up at least four ice cube trays a day. She would fill a large glass with the cubes and sip on the melted water all day. Sometimes, mostly at lunch, she would include some Pepsi (not Coke).

- She liked old Country/ Western music. The Sons of the Pioneers were a favorite.

- She idolized the silent cowboy movie star, Tom Mix. For as long as I can remember, she had a picture of him stuck in the frame of her dresser mirror. (Danny and I laugh that he "followed" us to Tucson. A restaurant here has his famous white cowboy outfit on display. By coincidence, he also died in a car accident a few miles from where we live where there is a memorial to him.)

- Of course, she adored her books; mostly mysteries. And she did read a book a day. When my parents moved to New Jersey, my brother Mike went up to help them pack up and move. He said every nook and cranny of their house was filled with books.

- She LOVED crossword puzzles. She would do them in pen. However, she was so smart, the American versions became too easy for her. She ended up sending away for The London Times puzzles.

- When she was younger, she liked to knit or crochet. Later on, she enjoyed cross stitch. When she got older and her hands began bothering her, she loved doing jigsaw puzzles. She had a huge board specifically designed for people who were bed-ridden in which they could lay out the puzzle pieces without them being scattered. Her youngest sister Lee, who lived near Cape Cod in Massachusetts, also loved jigsaw puzzles. When they were finished with the ones they were doing, they would exchange them in the mail.

- My mother loved the New York Yankees and the New York Giants. Her sister Lee loved the Boston Red Sox and the New England Patriots. Mommy really enjoyed the daily, playful email banter she had with Lee that always came down to who “had” the better team.

- She loved her sisters. She really enjoyed the phone calls they had with each other. For many years, she would travel to Florida to visit her middle sister, Shirley where she would really enjoy her time “catching up”.

- When my darling Danny and I would visit, she loved going out to dinner. An Italian restaurant called Canali’s was a favorite. You could reliably depend on her ordering a tumbler of Scotch, shrimp scampi and a glass of green Creme de Menthe for dessert.

- If we did go out for a steak, she liked hers practically raw. She would always say to the server, “VERY RARE! Tell the cook just to wave a match under it”.

- She loved “Murder, She Wrote” while it was still on television. But absolutely adored “Jeopardy”. She would often record it so she could watch it on her own time.

- She was truly a cat person. Besides having cats as pets, there were several figurines and pictures of cats she had placed around the house as proof of her devotion.

So, there you have just a small snapshot of my mother’s persona.

When I think of what made her tick, I smile, because these are the things that made her uniquely my mother.

I miss that part of her that made me smile.

## My poor father

After all that has been said and done with regard to my dad, all I can say about him is “my poor father”.

The circumstances surrounding his life that created the person he is were partially accidental, environmental and certainly mental. The last having the most influence on how he has borne out his days.

I want to begin this tale at the end. My father is still alive. He is just turning 94-years-old. Except for one first cousin, he has lived longer than anyone in his family. This is particularly amazing when one considers that most of the men on both sides of his family tree passed before their sixtieth birthday. His only brother died at 49!

He always had a lovely tenor voice, which he was never timid using. In the Sixties, he learned German from LPs so he could join a German men’s chorus. He sang in church at the drop of a hat. He even sang when he lived with my darling Danny and I in DC. There was an Open Mic held once a month through an arts organization on which I was on the Board. He would sometimes attend and always sing, but never with the piano. He would sing a cappella so he could interpret the song at his own pace. He loved Beethoven and Mozart and listened to their compositions throughout his entire life.

Physically, he is in amazing health. He is losing his hearing a bit and does suffer from macular degeneration. However, because of cataract surgeries he had in both eyes, what sight he has is a remarkable 20/20. Even more surprising, he hardly uses a cane to get around. He makes use of it when he goes out because he is sometimes a little “tippy”. His brain remains sharp. He can be very funny, with a quick wit stemming from keen observations.

However a remarkable mental acuity belies a dark emotional makeup. He can be charming and clever with strangers. But, those who know him best are sharply aware that this is merely a cover to mask his constant inner turmoil.

Going back to where it all began, Everard Nicholas Cupo was born on November 22, 1926 in Schenectady, NY. He was named after his Uncle Everard, his mother’s brother. Being of Italian heritage, which wasn’t always such a good thing in society, his mother’s father wanted his children to have “American” sounding names. So, after rifling through a baby book, Everard became the name of choice for his uncle and, subsequently, Dad.

My father was born at home at a time when hospital births were the novelty and not the other way around. He was the second of only two children; both boys. His older brother, John, was his elder by two years. However, while John was surly and brutish, Everard was funny and charming. Ev (as he was called ... or sometimes Evritt)

immediately became the “apple of his mother’s eye”. He easily fell into the role of mama’s boy that he never outgrew. To his mother, he could do no wrong, even when he pushed the boundaries of acceptable public behavior. Because of this, he learned to crave attention.

In retrospect, my long suffering mother wrote of him in their early days: “he was superficial and didn’t have a serious bone in his body. He teased people unmercifully”. He was a trickster and was even unsympathetic as to how he made other people feel, as long as he got the attention he needed. He was a rebel in a way that was sneaky and a bit devious. His thinking was if he could get away with something he shouldn’t be doing without getting caught, then it wasn’t such a bad thing to do after all!

One antic dad himself confessed to was the time he gave a cat a burial service. The problem was, the cat wasn’t dead. (He did say he “resurrected” it. It was still alive.)

However, when he was 16, a significant event happened to my father that had a lifelong effect on him.

Dad was climbing a tall tree near his house with a couple of friends. He saw a high tension wire running through the branches. Instead of avoiding it, he decided it would be “fun” to see what would happen if he touched it. The electrical surge almost killed him. He was instantly knocked unconscious. He was in such a position, he didn’t fall. However, because his muscles locked, his hand remained on the wire and the electricity continued to course through his body. One of his friends tried to get to him, but the part of the tree around him was now also electrified and the friend couldn’t get near. Thinking quickly, the friend broke off a branch and was able to knock my father’s hand from the wire. Dad was then thrown over the kid’s back and was half carried/ half dropped to the ground.

The theory was that Ev’s heart had stopped, but the impact from how hard he hit the ground was enough to start it beating again.

At the hospital, the doctors removed the pinkie finger from his left hand; the one that had been clutching the wire. They needed to remove some of the flesh on his thigh that had been “grounded” against the tree and was severely burned. The doctors also did several skin grafts to cover the damaged areas. As a result, dad has scars on many parts of his body and is missing a finger.

After his many weeks in the hospital, he spent a couple of months at home convalescing. If ever his mother doted on him before, she went overboard in her motherly duties. Dad wasn’t allowed to do ANYTHING by himself; everything was done for him. My father, being the kind of kid that he was, took advantage of the situation. This period in his life is where he “learned” to become completely spoiled. This event seemed to guide the way he lived as an adult.

He eventually did get well enough to go back to school. At that time, his class level was divided into two parts; one half of the seniors graduated in January and the other in June. He graduated high school in January 1945 and was immediately drafted into the army in February.

reminiscing, my father most often speaks of his time in the army. Although he was “in” for only a couple of years, it seems to have had a big influence on his sentimental outlook.

He did his basic training in Georgia, then was shipped to Leyte and Mindanao in The Philippines. He was in the 24th Division, 19th Infantry. He never “saw” battle, although, there had just been an awful fight in Leyte before he arrived. Apparently, there were Japanese militia still scattered throughout the jungle near where they were stationed. He had heard stories of soldiers finding their fellow G.I.s dead in their bunks in the morning, apparently having been killed by enemy combatants sneaking in and knifing the poor man while he slept. Dad had his own experience. He said he woke one night in his tent with a man coming near him with a raised knife. Dad yelled and the perpetrator ran away.

From that day, dad always had nightmares about that incident. As a kid, I remember waking up to his yelling out, “Hey! Who’s there? Who’s there?” (Creepy). My mother told us never to go near him when he was in that state. Soon after they were married, she tried to wake him and he nearly strangled her to death!

What dad didn’t know until he got to The Philippines was the military was gathering their troops in the South Pacific for a “D-Day type” of invasion of Japan. He was actually on a troop ship on the Pacific Ocean heading for the Japanese coast to invade when the atomic bombs were dropped and the Japanese Empire surrendered. Thus, instead of an invasion force, his Division became one of the first occupation contingents in Japan.

At first, he lived on his ship in Tokyo Bay. But was soon transferred to Southern Japan, first to the island of Shikoku and then farther south to the island of Kyushu. He went by train. He said the amazing thing to him was how advanced the Japanese technology was. The trains went through tunnels under the Sea of Japan. It was on the trip to Shikoku that the train stopped in Hiroshima.

The bomb had been dropped only about three weeks before. Dad said, because some American officials on his train needed to make a report, they stopped and spent a few hours there. He said there was nothing left of the city to see, except the skeletal remains of one building in the center of the metropolis. Otherwise, there was nothing to look at. (At that time, the dangers of the after effects of radiation poisoning wasn’t known.)

When they arrived at their assigned destination in Shikoku, the troops were assigned certain daily duties. Early on, Dad found out that the soldiers on “fire detail” were separated out from the rest of the G.I.s and got special treatment. So, when his platoon was asked who had any experience as a firefighter, my father raised his hand. He had NEVER fought a fire in his LIFE, not even a campfire. But, there he was, sleeping in special barracks and eating food prepared for them instead of tents and MREs (food in a can). He was afraid there would be an actual fire he had to face, which did happen, but not enough of a conflagration to threaten his well-being or to discover his ineptitude.

It was there in his fire brigade he met a guy who “knew somebody who knew somebody” who could sneak them off camp without getting caught. They weren’t supposed to leave AT ALL! But my dad had no trouble bucking the rules at night and going AWOL in order to go into town for a little fun. On one of his illegal forays, he met a Japanese nurse who took a liking to him. Neither of them could understand each other, but that didn’t seem to hinder their ... um ... relationship. Apparently, she was crazy for him. When he had to permanently leave, she was bereft. She ended up giving him a kimono, a pair of geta (sandals) and two swords; one was a Samurai sword and the other was a military issue dress sword.

(Back in the States, dad let a friend borrow the kimono and getas, but never got them back. I got an online evaluation of the military sword and went to Antiques Roadshow to get a value of the samurai sword. It turned out BOTH swords were military issue and weren’t worth the money we spent on motel and meals to get to the Roadshow.)

After dad returned to the States, he was adrift. He lived at home with his parents, which pleased his mother to no end, but caused consternation to his father. His dad was rightfully concerned that Ev was going to become a complete layabout.

Dad HAD to get a job. But he had no skills. He found a job washing cars at a Chevrolet dealership. Then at his Uncle Everard’s body shop washing even more cars. But after his Uncle died at an early age in 1949, the garage was closed and Dad was, again, jobless.

It was then that his father decided Ev needed to join the “business” and become a hairdresser, which is what his father did for a living. Ev was sent to beauty school and, after graduating, joined his father in the beauty salon.

He was really good at it. And he was in the constant presence of women who paid for his attention. My father loved women and he loved the attention of women.

I’ve written before how my father has Obsessive/Compulsive Disorder. This can be an asset when you are “doing” hair. The more fixated on the detail of the work done, the better the outcome. However (and this is a huge “however”) if that OCD causes you to become SO fixated on anything, you are unable to move onto any other task. You

literally “freeze”. And because you can’t get passed your fixation, overpowering anxiety and panic follow.

This is the situation my mother married into when they wed in 1952.

As I’ve said, Dad can be a charmer when he wants to be, but when he is “himself”, the ugly side comes to the forefront. My mother was completely blind-sided by this behavior and their marriage suffered.

The best way I can describe my father’s illness is his fixation on his health. Illnesses, whether imagined or real (mostly imagined) occupy his thoughts so completely, he becomes unable to function. Then the anxiety and the extreme panic attacks ensue. It is awful. Exacerbating this is his lifelong fear of dying young. I suppose this stems from the electrocution. He harps on how he almost, and maybe should have, died that day. But, for whatever reason, he always seemed to convey he felt that the fates would eventually kill him because it was “supposed” to have happened in the past. Thankfully, now that he is 94, he has figured out his fears of dying young can be assuaged. Unfortunately, his obsession with matters of health still plague him. A headache or some indigestion “has to be cancer”. More often than not, I have to “talk him down off the ceiling” and get him to face reality and REMIND HIM of his past behavior.

His mental illness forced my mother to institutionalize him twice. The first was after I was born in 1954 when their household was in terrible financial straights after my mother not working from the pregnancy. It was at a local mental health hospital where they treated him with lithium and electro-shock therapy. The second was after his mother died in 1968. Then, due to even worse mental incapacity, my mother forced him to check himself into the state mental hospital in Utica, NY.

Throughout his life, even though any traumatic occurrence happens to my father, when he “returns” to normal behavior, he pretends that nothing is wrong and nothing bad has ever occurred. It is as if he has convenient amnesia. Maybe it’s a survival technique he has taught himself in order to help him “move on”. The problem is he never learns from his past actions and history repeats itself over and over.

As I’ve wrote in my mother’s memoir, she ran the house. He only knew how to do hair, do laundry, mow the lawn, shovel snow and tinker. He did (and still does) like to tinker. His OCD mind will churn and churn until he is able to fix a broken item or solve a household problem. His positioning a saw blade under a kitchen cabinet in order to leverage jars so that they can be easily opened is just one example.

But he has never paid a bill or even written a check. He is not stupid, he is just conveniently uninformed.

A funny quirk he has from his OCD is that he loves to buy something and then, after finding a tiny flaw or a better deal, return it to the store. When my mother was still

alive, he would continually go in and out of the house to various stores to “look around”. My mother was just happy to have him out of the house.

One time, I called my mother (this was probably in the Eighties) to find out what was new. She said, “Your father got me a new VCR. It’s the SEVENTH one!” Over the course of a week, he bought and returned seven different VCRs until my mother made him stop. There was even one store in our home town from which he was banned!

When my mother became very ill in 2005, on invitation, they moved to New Jersey to be near my brother Mike, his wife Alicia and the grandkids. Dad did tend to my mother’s needs as much as he could AND took on all the household chores. When she yelled at him, he just let it roll off his back.

As the fates would have it, he actually DID become ill with prostate cancer during his years in NJ. But, for some reason, he didn’t completely freak out. He took his radiation and hormone shots in stride. He was in his early 80’s at the time and beat it! He also has had chronic basal skin cancer, for which part of his face has been whittled away by the doctors. (We have theorized it may have been due to his exposure at Hiroshima.) That never bothered him! Go figure.

When faced with a real malady, he has relatively no emotional trouble. It only seems to be the “stuff” he creates in his head where the preoccupation begins.

That said, during his time in New Jersey, he became an emotional adolescent and began to engage in some of the same shenanigans as from when he was a kid. Crude jokes and silly antics became his way of communicating. It was disconcerting for my relatives and sometimes alarming considering some of his jokes or references were off-color and most of his grandchildren were not yet adults. All the while, his bad behavior was punctuated by his continued obsessions about his health.

After my mother died in the nursing home in 2008, he continued living in an apartment building for senior citizens. However, over the years, his behavior just became worse. I suppose he was craving attention and it was his subconscious way of achieving it.

It all came to a head when his building became infested with bedbugs. For someone with OCD this was absolutely unbearable and his obsessions flared. The patterns that caused him to be institutionalized many years before began to re-emerge.

It was then my darling Danny suggested he come live with us in Washington, DC. When my mother was getting ill, we had already converted our basement into an in-law suite with the thought that one or both of them would move in with us. Well, it became time to follow through on that plan. We moved him to DC in 2014.

Little did we know what we were in for.

It was then I realized how much of a buffer my mother had been between he and we kids. And how much my brother Mike and sister-in-law, Alicia bore the stress caused

by his behavior. Living with him was a huge learning experience for me and Danny. His obsessions were overwhelming, especially with perceived bedbugs in our home. Every dust particle or dropped crumb was an insect to him. He had little pieces of toilet paper everywhere to “catch” a bug.

There was a VA hospital only a couple of minutes from our house, so he did get good treatment. They changed some of his medications around, but were afraid to touch one in particular because he had been taking it since the Sixties and were concerned it would cause withdrawal symptoms.

Anyway, in 2017 we all moved to Tucson. Danny drove our car down to our new home, but Dad and I had to fly. I asked him if he had ever flown before. He said, “Yes! As a teenager, a friend’s father took me up in his bi-plane”. Somehow it wasn’t the same.

In Tucson, he had his own room and lived a comfortable life. He filled his days playing with the television remote control, when he knew he shouldn’t, and, on several occasions, managed to wipe out any programming.

However he became more and more anxious and needier and needier in his quest for attention. Making matters worse, the VA doctor in Tucson decided to change his anxiety medication and wean him off the old prescription he had been taking all those years. He went through a six month withdrawal period and it was horrible. His anxiety became full blown panic attacks every few hours, day and night. The problem was that Dan and I didn’t have the training or tools for handling this. We were unable to be away for even short periods of time without him needing to go to the emergency room. Which, of course, always turned out to be nothing.

We had to move him to a nearby assisted living facility that specialized in mental health issues.

He was fine with the idea. He was aware that his behavior was taking its toll on us, especially my health. He transferred peacefully without any trauma.

And there he lives. The campus consists of ten buildings, each with eight to ten rooms around a “great” room. He has his own room and bathroom with a walk-in shower. He gets to walk within the security fenced campus as he likes and visit the other buildings and residents on “campus”.

Unfortunately, he seems to be the most cognitive person around, except for one or two guys and, of course, the staff. Dad has always been a flirt and a tease, which he does with the female workers, who make up most of the staff.

He seems to be resigned to living out his days there. However, with his ironically incredible good health, that could be a WHOLE lot of days ... weeks ... months ... years. Dan and I joke that he will probably outlive us all and be the last surviving WWII vet on Earth.

He is funny in that he rarely looks back. He mostly lives in the present. His only regret is that he is trapped on campus by the coronavirus. He is wanting to get out again and eat a real Italian pizza ... go shopping ... and return a few items.

With the help of others, I am,  
A dutiful son

## Play school

Schonowe Elementary School.

That's "shon-oh-weee"! It's an Iroquois Indian word that means "the great flats". Those flats are the GREAT swamps I've written about that were at the bottom of the hill I lived on ... but wasn't supposed to go near ... but somehow, sorta managed to go anyway.

Anyway ...

Schonowe School was built on the side of "my" hill along Schermerhorn Road, only a couple of minutes walk from my house. It was an easy stroll to and from the school, except where I had to cross Putnam Road, just steps from my house. Putnam ran up and down the hill, but curved liked it had too much to drink and listed far to the right so that you couldn't see the traffic speeding up the hill until it was on top of you. Many a time, after I had started my way across the road, I was forced to frantically run the rest of the way lest I got squished by the sudden appearance of a vehicle going way too fast. Fortunately, I remained intact enough to be able to enjoy the benefits of Schonowe School and its environs.

It was where I went to school from kindergarten through third grade, so I knew it well.

(As an aside here ... as a kid, I was ALWAYS confusified as to WHY the "sch" in Schenectady and Schermerhorn was pronounced as a hard "sk", whilst the "sch" in Schonowe was said with a soft "shh". It still is a mystery that will probably remain through the ages.)

The building was built in the late 1940's to replace a one room school house that was on the same site. Rumor had it that the old one room school was still in the basement of the newer building. HOWEVER, even MY rabid curiosity was NOT going to take me down into the depths of the unknown beneath my classrooms to assuage my nosy nature.

Ugh! Spiders!

My mother's sister, Shirley attended the former facility. However, she never commented on whether or not she liked the concept of sharing one's studies with a bunch of kids from all different ages and grades.

It makes me think of something straight out of "Little House on the Prairie". But this was the suburbs of Schenectady, New York! We were civilized there. Never mind there was a full-blown dairy farm just down the hill from the school. That should NOT have warranted something out of the Wild West!

My mother's father, "Pa", being a local carpenter, helped build the new building. It had a wood and steel frame, but its facade was all brick.

The double front doors, which sat under a small, white, pillared portico, faced Schermerhorn Road. The building stretched out on one level like a ranch house on steroids, with a wing of classrooms to the right of the entryway and a wing of classrooms to the left. One loooooong hallway traversed the length of the building, ending in a gymnasium/cafeteria/auditorium at the end of the left wing. Beyond that was a large parking lot.

There was an exit door with a cement porch at the end of each wing, but, oddly, there was no door on the backside of the building. It always seemed to me that they must have forgotten to install one.

"Roy, I thought you were putting in the door".

"No, Hank. You were supposed to put it in".

"Oh, well. Too late now".

The front door and portico faced a broad lawn centered with the obligatory flag pole. There was a half-circle of a driveway that edged the lawn. Each end emptied out onto Schermerhorn Road, but drew a lazy arc to the front portico; perfect for an embarrassed parent to drop off a truant student, or for picking up a nauseated child.

The front lawn was broad enough for fantastic games of Capture the Flag after school, on weekends or during the summer. The flag pole was perfect demarcation for the two sides of the "field". When you had as many kids playing as we did with the gang of children who lived on Schermerhorn Road, it was always a full-out donnybrook! Personally, I may have been small, but I was fast. Being that I was LOUSY at sports, this was something with which I could avoid complete humiliation and actually enjoy myself.

Oooooo, we had fun!

Another game we would play on that front lawn was "Run On the Car".

Because the school was built on a steep hill, it sat below the level of the road by about eight feet. There was a short, steep embankment that led from the flat lawn up to the road. We kids (and there usually were a bunch of us) would lie on our bellies on that incline and wait for a car to come down Schermerhorn Road. As soon as we saw a vehicle, someone would yell, "CAR!", and we would take off running to the flag pole. The object was to get to the flag pole, then back to the little hill and throw ourselves down onto our bellies before the automobile passed us.

Now, image, if you will, driving along, peacefully, minding your own business, when you suddenly see a HORDE of juveniles racing at break-neck speed toward your car? We definitely caused a few tire skid marks in our day.

ANOTHER favorite was Frisbee bike tag. This was heaps of fun the more kids you had playing. Two teams were chosen up. One team would evenly split up to start on the three porches the school had; the front portico and the two at the ends of the wings, each serving as a “safe” zone. The other team would be on their bicycles with a Frisbee in each of their hands. The object was for the entire “porch team” to get all the way around the school building without getting hit by a Frisbee. The only way the “bike team” could throw a Frisbee was by remaining on their bike! This took some skill! But the “porch team” had that loooong expanse behind the building to get across, where there were no “safe” porches, without getting hit. If you WERE hit, you were out of the game. If only ONE person made it all the way around without getting hit, the “porch team” won. If nobody made it around, the “bike team” won.

I'll tell you, carnage did occasionally occur. More than one scrape, bruise and/or contusion happened in that folderol. But, oh, did we scream with laughter!

We didn't always use the school and it's front lawn as our arena. There was an actual schoolyard. And it was HUGE! It sat another eight to ten feet below the actual school, encompassing the area below the right wing and the entire backside of the building.

There were two full baseball fields, a humongous area with swing sets, teeter-totters, a jungle gym and slides. In addition, there was an enormous grassy area that no one ever used, because we already had so much turf in which to play.

However we didn't always need the provided apparatus the school system invested in to amuse ourselves!

Even though the front was wide open to the public, the yard was surrounded on three sides by a chain link fence that stood about five feet high. MANY an hour, my close friends and I walked on the top of that fence, balancing ourselves as best we could in order to get alllll the way around the yard. Using the various flora sticking out over the fence to steady ourselves, it was fairly easy. We passed the time talking as we made our way through the occasional thicket of branches, sometimes feeling for the top of the fence with our feet like a tightrope walker. But it was those random straightaways with no vegetation to help keep our balance that became our bugaboo. Inevitably, one of us would fall off and that would be the end of the adventure for that day. But, little by little, we became really adept at it. Except, on one occasion, when I jumped off and sprained my ankle, requiring a visit to the emergency room. The indignity of it was, by that time, I felt I had mastered the intricacies of the fence. I was in control. I didn't fall, I jumped! Well, that's what I got for being over-confident. I think my pal Jay (or maybe Peter) actually made it all the way around the fence. However, as commendable as that was, it wasn't the main purpose. It was the “doing” that gave it its appeal and made it so much fun.

And speaking of traversing around the school, that is another activity Jay and I did for hours and hours ... and HOURS! Jay's and my favorite thing to do was walk on the sidewalk around the school building and talk; ad infinitum.

That is, when we weren't playing super heroes on the playground. Well, we CALLED it "playing super heroes", but it was our code for "playing house". My gang read Marvel Comics. I liked "The Fantastic Four" and Jay, "The X-Men". But when the two of us decided to pretend to "be" the super hero characters of choice, I would always be Invisible Girl and Jay would be Medusa, also a female character. Then we would go over to the slide and swings and, in the dirt under the playground paraphernalia, mark out the rooms of our houses. Sometimes we would use our feet, sometimes a stick. Rather than, the "slam bang" of what one would THINK kids playing "super heroes" would be doing, we busily created tidy homes for our characters.

I still laugh about that.

But, as I was saying, mostly Jay and I circled that building for HOURS, talking and making our pre-adult observations about life as we knew it. We spoke endlessly about everything from comics to television to our families to neighborhood gossip. It was therapy before we even knew what therapy was.

To look at us, we were an odd couple. He was a year older and, at least, a foot taller than me. I had to take three steps to his one. But, because I was always so immersed in our conversation, I never felt exhausted by our "tour". We both had curly/frizzy hair and were somewhat slender. I must have looked a bit like Jay's "Mini-Me".

During the summer, sometimes we would take a break in the back corner of the school. There was a part of the building that, instead of sticking out like a regular corner, it jutted inwards, creating an alcove. Even in July, the winter's snow bank that was pushed up by the snow plow, barely melted because the sun never reached that spot. On a hot day, it was a cool respite.

But then we would start up again, circling and circling, as if winding ourselves up like a spring in preparation for the usual long walk up the hill to our friend Gene's house, who lived far up Putnam Road, where the conversation and games would continue.

On the side of the schoolyard, just below the parking lot was a free-standing two-car garage where the janitorial staff kept all the equipment needed to maintain that vast outdoor expanse. However, every summer, the town's Parks and Recreational Department set up a summer "play school". The equipment was pushed to one side and the machinery was replaced by a picnic table and oodles of books and games. Monday through Friday councilors would come in and read books or organize baseball games (in which I would often act as team mascot and cheerlead).

My favorite day, however, was Tuesday because that was the day the “arts and crafts” person would come and offer some kind of crafty project where a useless but enjoyable item would be created. It was there I learned how to make statues out of liquid plaster-of-Paris. I made a dog, but an air bubble got stuck in the mold. It was missing part of its nose. Or how to make a lanyard for all the non-existent keys I needed to carry. You remember lanyards, don’t you? You started with long strips of pliable plastic that you folded over themselves in order to make a serpentine-like object. It was every kid’s dream to make one ... and then never use it again.

Eventually, the powers-that-be had a tether ball pole cemented into the ground nearby. Tether ball was a game where a soccer-like ball was “tethered” to the top of a tall pole by a long-ish rope. You were supposed to punch the ball as hard as you could so that it would swing around to your opponent who punched it back to you. The first person to wrap the rope all the way around the pole won. I was dreadful at that game. It only took one time getting “beaned” in the head by the fast moving ball that I swore off the game. Instead, when the challenge of a tether ball game started circulating, I would wander up to the parking lot and graze on the raspberries growing wild along the chain link fence. But Marilyn, my friend Jay’s older sister, was the all-time champ. She had an innate proclivity for the thing. She could “slaughter” anybody, including the boys. From the way she slammed that ball, I always wondered if she was working out some inner frustrations. Whatever, she was the admiration of the summer play school gang.

Summer school was wonderful. I have great memories of sitting on the picnic bench in the cool of the garage or in the shade under an enormous maple tree nearby playing Parcheesi or Chinese checkers for hours.

It was a child’s paradise.

Unfortunately, all good things come to an end.

After I had grown and moved away from the neighborhood, the school system decided to consolidate some of their satellite schools. They closed Schonowe School and sold it to a private business for office space. The playground apparatus was removed and the baseball fields were allowed to grow over. The grass was no longer maintained and the whole site lost its eye-appeal. Instead of looking inviting, it took on the countenance of being sterile and unfriendly.

However, as I look back, I know I was so lucky to have been around when it was alive with the shouts and laughter of children. It was an extraordinary place where kids could use their imaginations and relish having the times of their lives.

One last memory of the school yard.

One winter in the mid-Sixties, we ended up with seven and a half feet of snow on the ground. This was followed by a sudden, warm Spring. When all that snow melted, the subsequent snowmelt water stayed in the yard! For some reason, it didn’t flow down

the hill below it. The yard magically transformed into a large, shallow lake. Jay, who lived across the street from the school, had a small, blue plastic kiddie pool in the shape of a boat. He would take the pool down to the “lake” and we would paddle around, taking in the sights. We floated past the location of our former super hero “houses” under the slide and tour around the perimeter where we “walked the fence”. We looked up at the school, still looking new in the spring air. remembering all the fun we had. And we talked ... and talked ... and talked.

I loved that.

The “lake” was only there once, but it was truly a special memory among a multitude of special memories of my childhood adventures at Schonowe Elementary School.

In reverie,  
The Invisible Girl

## Looking like Christmas

My darling Danny and I decided it was time to put up our Christmas decorations. Unlike most big box stores these days, we did NOT start creating Christmas magic during the Labor Day holiday. No we did not!

We are the epitome of restraint.

That is also reflected in our ultra tasteful decorations.

You think I am pulling your leg, don't you? You now think I am going to twist my words around by describing the outrageous electric light show that is becoming the height of Christmas decor these days. Again, I say, "no". We are much too homosexual to allow THAT sort of thing to influence our proprietary.

On the exterior of our home, we have lovely white swags accompanied by even lovelier red bows hugging the eaves. Yes, they are electrified, BUT the color of the bulbs are the same as the background they sit on. And they CERTAINLY do NOT blink.

AS I've stated ... tasteful.

When we lived in our row house in DC, we had the exact same swags and bows. We lined our double porch rails with them. However, when it was time to move to Tucson, we were going into a 55 and older "association" community. Assuming there were strict codes on what could be in the front exterior of your house, we assumed our decorations would be "decorations non grata". So, sadly, with a bit of heartache, we tossed them away.

Boy howdy, were we wrong! The first Christmas here, we passed a house a few blocks from ours that looked like something out of "The Great Christmas Light Fight". Or, at least, something the "Light Fight" threw up. You had to wear sun glasses to look at it all.

We thought to ourselves, "Hmmmm. Perhaps we were a bit rash in our assumption of no Christmas adornments".

Regretfully, it was too late to "join in the fun" for that first season and decorate our house ... but the NEXT year, we were set! It took a little searching around in the "Googly" world and VOILA! ... I found them; the exact same decorations!

So now they elegantly drape from the edge of our roof, along with a few extra TASTEFUL red, lighted bows. Although, I confess, we decided it was looking a little barren in one spot, so we recently "forced" ourselves to purchase just oooooone more set of swags and accompanying bow.

We're done now, I promise.

Our interior decor may not be as subtle as the exterior, but it IS uniquely appointed. We have Danny's dad's wooden Santa Clauses that he whittled and painted

himself. My favorite of the Santas is the one with him wearing red long underwear, smoking, holding a beer Stein with his butt crack showing. His dad was so creative!

We also have our Precious Moments nativity crèche figures Danny bought back in the mid-Eighties displayed in the wooden farm “stall” his brother-in-law, Dave, made for him. Of course it is guarded by a large plastic angel which should go on the top of a tree, but, instead, balances on the little rooftop.

And SPEAKING of trees, we are so proud of ours. It is an eight foot tall, black, wrought iron “tree” with a metal star that I have spray painted bronze adorning the top. In addition, I have wrapped the “tree” trunk and branches in white Christmas lights. The metal curlicues on the branches are perfect for the hanging of ornaments. No pine needles to get in the way of one’s viewing. Each year, we decide what ornaments to hang by their “theme”: wood, straw, glass, etc. etc. dot dot dot. We have A LOT of Christmas ornaments. However, we used to have more ... lots more.

(Did you know if you donate your Christmas ornaments to a legitimate charity, the I.R.S. allows you to deduct \$2.00 per ornament from your income taxes??? For real! I won’t say how many we donated when we moved to Tucson, but, because of it, a good chunk o’ change came back to us that year.)

Decorating for the holiday (to a certain degree) brings me a whole bunch of joy. Growing up, we always had a very traditional Christmas tree with some ancient ornaments and the obligatory tinsel (which, for years was made of lead ... maybe that’s why I am so short). But we never decorated beyond that.

The happy, ooey, gooey idea of decorating potential didn’t occur to me until I was an unbridled adult. It was only then I came to realize the capacity for that extry enjoyment of the holiday from adorning the outside as well as the inside of one’s home.

Of course, as I mentioned earlier, some people go w-a-a-a-y too far in their “enjoyment”.

When Danny and I still lived in DC, we used to LOVE to drive around and look at folkses’ Christmas lights. There was a suburb north of us named Hollywood, Maryland that was notorious for it’s working class citizens’ interpretation of Christmas cheer. We would toodle around in our car and scream with laughter. Some house fronts were just crammed with decorations. The more the “merrier”. But my favorites were the ones you could tell were put together with the owner’s tongue firmly planted in their cheeks. Those were the displays that could be nothing but a representation of their proprietors’ sense of humor. The best was the house that sat on a corner lot that had Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus next to a full Santa’s Workshop along side the Three Wise Men, Rudolph and Frosty the Snowman with a sleigh full of toys and reindeer flying over everybody’s heads ... all in LIGHTS! They accompanied the all ready half buried clawfoot

bathtub featuring a statue of the Virgin. Of course, that was electrified and ALL lit up as well. You can't tell me that homeowner didn't know they were creating pure irony.

However, in my "mature" years, I have come to revel even more in the haphazard, slap-dash attempts of outdoor Yuletide expression. The pitiful gesture of one string of lights dangling down from a window sill onto a bush, or sometimes just dangling, brings me as much pleasure these days as a full-blown electrical recreation of "The Nutcracker".

My friend, Rick in Florida, has a GREAT (private) group site on Facebook called "Shitty Christmas Lights". Looking at it brings hours and hours of enjoyment. This season, there already are some choice pictures posted. Absolute rapture.

With that said, the art of "over-the-top" decorating doesn't have to be the exclusive hallmark of exterior ornamentation.

Danny and I had a friend in DC named Roy. Roy was in his seventies when we knew him. He was retired and lived in a very small, two bedroom apartment on the second floor of a townhouse. Roy LOVED holidays ... ANY holiday. He would decorate his apartment as each celebration came and went. But, Christmas ... Christmas was truly special to him. Roy's Yule decorations were on steroids. He usually began with installing 35 to 40 Christmas trees in his apartment!! Of course, they weren't all full-sized trees, but they weren't all tiny versions either. Every inch ... I'm telling you ... every millimeter of space was decorated. He covered the walls, floor and even the ceilings with something. There were spangles and bowers and Mylar and swags; snow and icicles and igloos and snowmen. And everything was animated. He had a holiday Ferris wheel that was as tall as my shoulders. There was a carousel about two feet wide circling and playing Christmas music. Christmas themed rugs on the floor, Christmas themed throws on the furniture and "red and green" holiday lanterns reflecting from the ceiling. There is simply no way I can possibly truly describe what it was like to walk into that apartment at Christmastime. And remember, he had decorated the whole place for Halloween. He barely had two months to tear everything down and get "Christmas" in place. But, somehow, every year, he did it.

I once asked him why he took so much time and care creating the impossible. He said it was because it made him happy.

Who could argue with that?

Happiness is relative.

There was one Christmas in New York City ... it was 1981 ... when my roomie, Leslie, and I had noooo money. We were poor as the proverbial church mice. We certainly couldn't afford a tree at full price. However, we were plucky and we were smart. We knew the Christmas tree vendors would practically give away any trees they had left by Christmas Eve. Taking advantage of that fact, we each put in five dollars and

bought a leftover tree. Then, after dragging it up to our second floor apartment, we decorated it with paper chains, popcorn strings and ornaments we made from anything we found in the apartment. I had some old yarn, so I made a mouse and an elephant out of the yarn, some hairbrush bristles and beads from a pull-chain I cut up and “painted” with magic markers. Then we had a “Bring Your Own Booze and Snacks” party for all our friends. Anyone who was still in town for the holiday came over. It ended up being one of the best Christmases I ever had.

I still have my mouse and elephant. I put them on my tree every year. Even though they are almost forty years old, they still are in good shape.

The funny thing about these simple ornaments is they cheer me more than all those store bought decorations and glittering displays I have seen or owned over all the years. They remind me that it isn't the flashy artifice that creates the feeling of Christmas, it's the personal, heartfelt expression that helps usher us into the true spirit of the season.

Merry three weeks to Christmas,  
Santa's Little Elf

## Passing Fancies

A while back, I wrote two blog-things on famous people I have met. Such as my writings were, they weren't meant to be accounts with which to boast. No. These were stories of folks I was introduced to and with whom I had a semi-rational conversation. (Being that it was me who was one half of the discussion, it can only be called "semi-rational".) To this day, I am amazed these encounters happened at all!

With this entry, I am going to share with you some more persons of note whose paths crossed mine ... or whose paths I crossed ... depending on one's perspective. With a few exceptions of a more extended repartee, I had only a passing exchange with most of these citizens of note.

Of course, with acting as my profession, I was lucky to do entire runs of shows with some genuinely famous folks. But they are not who I am going to talk about here. Yes, there will be a couple of instances where I relate a yarn about someone with whom I shared a stage for one night, but our interaction was minimal.

So, the following vignettes are in no particular order. For those of you who are craving a chronological account, I would ask you to turn away. It ain't happening'.

In addition, many of these encounters were so brief, there was no way I could assess the personality or even make a judgment call to share with you whether they were naughty or nice. I will just leave that to Santy Claus. When I AM able to lay down an appraisal of the person, keep in mind, it was just the gut reaction I had in the moment.

A reminder ... these scenarios are random ... just as are my thoughts these days.

- On a HOT summer evening in the early 1980's, I was spending a season in New York City by myself, without my roommate, Leslie. She had landed a job doing summer stock which took her away from the apartment for the summer. That night, I was bored and decided to treat myself to an ice cream cone. At the time, I was living on the Upper West Side at West 80th Street and Broadway. Just a few blocks north on Broadway was an ice cream parlor with an open window facing the street. One didn't need to go into the shop to get some sweet, creamy relief. When, I got there, I saw that A LOT of other folks had the same idea I did. So, I placed myself in the already long line and waited to take my turn. As I was standing there, squinting at the board displaying the flavors of the day, I heard someone behind me say, "What looks good?" I didn't reply because I thought the guy was talking to a companion. But, again, the man behind me repeated, "What looks good?" Only now it was a little more obvious he was talking to me. I turned around to come face-to-face with the comedian, Jerry Stiller. I was in such shock, I don't even know if I mumbled anything. But, assuaging my awkwardness, he just cordially

asked what I liked. I could only get out a “s-s-strawberry”. He agreed that probably the “basics” were the best. I stupidly nodded my head. He just nicely went on to say, “Yep. That’s what I’m gonna get. Strawberry”. I said something random like, “It was hot. Everybody had the same idea. Hope the line moves along”. Thank goodness I didn’t yell, “YOU’RE JERRY STILLER! WHY ARE YOU TALKING TO ME???” We just smiled at each other and I turned my back on him. I noticed he did choose strawberry.

- In 1980, The Royale Theatre on Broadway was the site of a revival production of “Whose Life is it Anyway?” starring Mary Tyler Moore. At the time, I was working in the phone room taking ticket orders for the show. I had gone out for lunch and was just coming back into the darkened theatre when I bumped into the theatre manager who was about to walk outside. With him was Mary Tyler Moore. He pleasantly introduced me to her. In that moment, I found her to be very formal, bordering on icy. Her “hello” was obligatory and held no personality. She obviously was a person who “held her cards very close to her chest”. I didn’t encounter her again.

- From the early 1990’s through to about 2010, I performed in many music revues for the Smithsonian Museum’s American Musical Department in Washington, DC. There are several performance spaces spread over the various museum buildings around The Mall. On this occasion in 1995, I was invited to participate in a revue of music by Oscar Hammerstein in honor of the anniversary of his 100th birthday. We were performing in a larger hall called Baird Auditorium. Built in 1910, it is a lovely concert hall with a somewhat rounded stage and great acoustics. The evening’s guest speaker was Celeste Holm. She had been the original Ado Annie in Rodgers’ and Hammerstein’s “Oklahoma” on Broadway. My friend Cindy and I were standing on the stage a couple hours before the show. We were just finishing a process where the techies check the sound and lights. At that point, all the singers (us) were taking a break onstage while the folks in charge did a “last-minute” pow-wow in the audience. Suddenly, one of the doors in the back of the theatre, behind the seats, banged open and in strode Ms. Holm herself. She stomped down the aisle, going directly onto the stage and landed in front of Cindy and me. She looked us both straight in the eyes and demanded, “Who do I talk to to get a pink spotlight around here???” Cindy and I were dumbfounded. I don’t think we said ANYTHING. We just pointed to the director who was standing in another aisle to the left of the stage, and called out his name. I don’t think either of us said a peep to Ms. Holm. One thing I will say about her, being 78 years old at the time, she was a force of nature. Goodness only knows what she was like in her youth.

- Another “backstage” encounter happened when I was doing a fundraiser for a theatre I had often worked at outside of Washington, DC. Signature Theatre was celebrating it’s 15th or 20th Anniversary (I don’t exactly recall) with a big gala show. I

believe it was in the mid-2000's. Anyway, Kathie Lee Gifford was hosting. I was going to perform a song I did from "Cabaret". Ms. Gifford remained seated off stage right during the rehearsal. While rehearsal was going on, the director grabbed me, saying he wanted to introduce me to Kathie. He knew Regis Philbin was my cousin, so he wanted to see her reaction. After making introductions, he told her "the news". She looked at me and, with a half-smiling look, said, "I feel sorry for you". Then she laughed a little too hard, saying she was "just kidding, just kidding". I was never sure how much she was kidding. Sometimes the truth comes out when one is "just kidding".

- After performances, it is "polite" for the famous to come backstage to meet the cast. It was in these next cases where I met some of the acclaimed "rank and file" I NEVER would have expected to meet, much less talk to.

- From 1989 to 1995, in Washington, DC, I did a social and political satire revue called "The Mrs. Foggybottom Show". It was all original material. In our tuxedos and cocktail dresses, we skewered society at large. It was very popular with the political elite. It was after the show on a few occasions, I had the great pleasure to make small talk with Supreme Court Justices John Paul Stevens and (the notorious) Ruth Bader Ginsburg herself. They each came a couple of times and were always chatty and very friendly. They were both quite avid theatre aficionados and their positive demeanors made me smile.

- Speaking of being avid, in 2002, I did the musical "Sweeney Todd" at The Kennedy Center. One evening, the cast was asked to gather on stage after the show to meet "some surprise guests". It was General Colin Powell and his wife. They were SO excited to be there! I never knew what a musical theatre "geek" General Powell was. They just gushed! They were so cute. (Never, in a million years would I ever think I would describe General Powell's demeanor as "cute", but that is how he appeared that evening).

- But as MUCH as I adored meeting folks like Justice Ginsburg, my heart reserves a special spot for who I got to ogle over when I was doing theatre in Lexington, Kentucky. It was the early 1980's. I was doing "Fiddler on the Roof". It was a "special" performance that night because the box office proceeds were being donated to a local animal shelter. There was a small reception in the lobby afterward. Now, I admit, in those days, in the early 1980's, I still had the bloom of youth on my cheek, so I was looking' kind-a cute. When I walked into the lobby, the first person I saw was the manager of the theatre. He said to me, "There is someone here who wants to meet you." I thought, "Okaaaay, who would want to meet me?" He turned me to my left and I found myself staring directly into the chest of 1950's movie idol, Tab Hunter. As I looked up to his beautiful face, his blue eyes gently looked down at me. He sweetly smiled and told me how much he enjoyed my performance. I said my shaky thanks, but was thinking, "I

only was Mendel, the rabbi's son. The most outstanding thing I did in the show was the bottle dance!" (I danced with a bottle on my head). Then I thought, "Is he hitting on me???" I was too self-conscious to find out. After an exchange of words, I excused myself and crossed the room ... completely oogle-googly. I didn't speak with him again, but every time I glanced his way, he was looking at me. (Eeeeeeeeeek!)

- I have also encountered some self-righteous celebs who were just plain nasty. I won't reveal any names, lest I get sued, but I will give you a hint at one of them: a busty, 1960's sex symbol whose only good assets were the two sticking out from her chest.

- When I wasn't on stage, I worked in the box office. Many of my peers waited tables, which, from past experience, had left me with psychological scars. I was happy to sell tickets because the pay was much better than slinging hash and the hours were flexible. In DC, I worked in the box office for The Kennedy Center, The National Theatre and Ford's Theatre. It was at Ford's where I ended up yakking with a few of some of the more interesting "names".

- "Shakespeare for my Father" was a one-woman show starring Lynn Redgrave. It was about her father, the Shakespearean actor, Michael Redgrave. Before every performance, she would come to the box office window to see how many people were attending that coming show. She was often dressed in layers of clothes with sweaters and coats and scarves all in disarray around her body. She always seemed a bit discombobulated, but was joyful and likable. Her daily forays turned into lovely chats with either me or whomever was at the window at the time of her visit. We all came to enjoy her quirky pleasantries.

- But speaking of quirky, "Grandma Moses" was also a one-woman show about the painter. However, this one was helmed by Cloris Leachman. Ms. Leachman also came to the window before each show to check on the attendance. However, she was a LOON! Her conversation went all over the place. We couldn't decide if she was pretending to be crazy or was simply genuinely nuts. Every once in a while, some lucidity would pop out, but the box office staff never knew what she would say next. In spite of that, she seemed very nice and was quite enthusiastic. And, I have to add, was brilliant on stage. Go figure.

- One more enthusiastic person worth mentioning was not so famous, but grew to be the country's "mom" through her son. Bill Clinton's mother, Virginia Clinton Kelly was in town for his first inauguration in 1993. While she was in DC, she went to see a show at Ford's Theatre. When she came to get her tickets at the box office, I happened to be at the window. She was SO excited about everything; Bill's upcoming presidency, the show, Washington, DC, the sights ... EVERYTHING! She got chatting so much, she stayed at my window for another 20 minutes. She was an absolutely delightful person and I could have gone on making small talk with her for hours.

- While I was still at Ford's Theatre, the staff was incredibly lucky to be able to attend the annual "Ford's Salutes The President" performance and gala. Each year had a different theme. One year in the mid-1990's, it was all country/western. When they were rehearsing the show, the performers used the Lincoln Museum as a lounge. The Museum was located in the basement below the box office. The box office had a back door which led down into the Museum where the restrooms were located. Of course, I simply HAD to use the loo when the rehearsal was going on. No one stopped me. Walking in I found myself surrounded by country music's best and, of course, their managers. I didn't actually meet anyone at that moment, but I got to see some well-known faces up close and personal. The one that truly stays with me was Miss Tammy Wynette. She was seated speaking to her manager. She was already in full make up and "hair". But, in spite of that, she looked incredibly fragile; almost as if you accidentally bumped into her, she would break. I wasn't surprised when I heard she had passed away a few years later. Sometimes "the business" can take its toll on a person.

- BUT, later, after the performance, it was during the gala in the Rotunda of the Capitol, I had the joy of meeting and introducing my very own long suffering mother to Roy Clark. My mother was a huge country/western fan. I knew she would LOVE to be there, so I got special permission to include her in all the festivities. My mother was in awe of not only attending, but of seeing some of her favorite singers on stage and then at the party. But she really wanted to meet Roy Clark. So, I brazenly walked over to him and introduced myself. I told him what a great fan my mother was of his and asked him if he would he mind if I brought her over? He was very friendly and welcoming. He said he would be delighted to meet her. So, I brought my nervous mother over to meet one of her idols. They hit it off and spoke for a long while. I left her to her reverie. It made me so happy to be able to make this once in a lifetime experience possible for her.

Thinking back, meeting and having the opportunity to briefly talk to all these people who made a name for themselves, did and still does tickle me. But even more, I found more enjoyment in seeing my mother share some of her personal time with one of her favorites.

It may have been these folks' talents or their intellect or association with someone else who was famous that "raised them up" to being celebrated. However, relating to them one-on-one helped to remind me that, in spite of fame or notoriety, all these "stars" are as normal as the rest of us; with good and not-so-good sides to each of them.

No idols; just human.

We are all in it together,  
Stevie

## Best Friends Forever ... more or less

I cherish my friends. I really do. They bring out the best in me. They are like points of light that illuminate my life, like a mirrored disco ball lighting up my “dance floor”. Without them, I would dry up; blowing away as dust in a desert wind.

With that said, however, maintaining a friendship can be a slippery slope. That emotional closeness with someone who isn't your mate is reliant on both participants ... well ... participating. On the one hand, that closeness may seem like it will last forever. On the other, the passage of time can take its toll on that rapport. As said on the TV show “Project Runway” ... “Sometimes you're in and sometimes you're out.”

Most everyone has a long-term pal or two who survive the ups and downs of this rolly coaster of a life. But there are some that don't always stand the test of time. It seems the dissolution of a friendly relationship has happened to everyone. Sometimes its by the distance of miles or from the change in focus in your life as you get older. Or sometimes it can be through a difference of opinion. It simply happens.

I am bringing this up due to something that has happened to two childhood friends of mine. We've all known each other since we were kids. The two I am speaking of never moved away from our hometown and remained in each others' daily goings on since the early days. However, like a relationship that has lasted for too long, they have grown apart in opinions and how they deal with distinctly different outlooks on life. One friend is passive and non-confrontational; the other has become impatient and a bully when it comes to people who do not agree with him. Now you would think, after ALL these years of knowing each other up close and personal, they would be able to communicate without one getting hostile and the other getting hurt. However the workings of the adult personality are very different than those of a child's. Acting out from bad behavior is usually reserved for children. Although, from what I understand is going on, there is A LOT of childish behavior going on. Both of them are in a damaging vortex that is pulling them apart. It has become disillusioning. It's heartbreaking for those around them to watch it happen, and even more sorrowful for the two of them. Even though it appears it's the end of their friendship ... and such a thing happens all the time ... it still is sad.

But, then again, there are buddies you can have for YEARS and never see or rarely speak to. But when you DO come together, you “pick up” as though you have never been apart. Those are the true friends with which you share an understanding and a certain amount of forgiveness ... and, yes, respect ... and, I might add, love. I have a few pals like that. A couple are from elementary school, a few from college and some from traveling

down life's path together. These are the cherished souls who would never disrespect my choices as I would not disrespect theirs.

I think respect comes down to being able to communicate differences without hostility; to share ideas or observations without judgment. Those are the friends with staying power.

Now, there are friends who come and go in one's life in which you already know the playing field will empty out as soon as the game is over. For example, this can happen from one's days in college. Oh sure, there will be one or two select pals you might stay in touch with, but, for the most part, everybody knows when the diplomas are handed out and you are back in your old hometown bedroom, those college buds will just become a happy memory.

We, in the the-A-ter are OH too well acquainted with that concept. When you come together for a show, you are thrown into extremely close proximity with each other for maybe a few weeks of rehearsal and a few more weeks, months or, sometimes, a year or so of togetherness. You learn to get to know know each other very quickly. Life stories are bared practically on the first day you meet and are as quickly forgotten when the run of the show is over.

The brilliant author and playwright, Lillian Hellman, wrote of this exact thing in her book "Pentimento". In reference to folks in the theatre, she stated, "People have come together, as much by accident as by design, done the best they can and sometimes the worst, profited or not, gone their way vowing to see each other the next week, mean it, and wave across a room a few years later".

Yep.

Then there is the situation where you confuse an acquaintance with a friend. Having a lot of acquaintances and thinking they are all friends is self-deception that becomes emotionally exhausting! I mean, HOW many dinners and movies and parties and plays and THIS and THAT can you go to in one week? I think the belief of everyone being on the same level of closeness comes from the folly of youth. I made that mistake in my twenties. As I was writing 150 Christmas cards to my "best and closest", I had an epiphany when I realized they ALL weren't my "best" and they certainly weren't my "closest".

That all said, there are cases where a friendship completely disappears, unbeknownst to one of the friends. One party decides, for whatever reason, you are no longer friends and the other is left dangling and feeling abandoned, never knowing, "What happened???" . Those are the ones that hurt ... truly, deeply hurt. One such disappearance happened to my darling Danny and myself. It took a long time for Danny and I to move past it ... and we eventually did. However, we still don't know what happened.

When we lived in Washington, DC, we both became VERY close to a fella I will call, "Dee". Danny had known him years before I came into the picture. We all went to church together and sang in the choir. "Dee" and I performed on stage together. We shared many mutual friends. We socialized and partied and laughed together ... for YEARS! When "Dee" moved away from DC, we stayed close pals. We would visit each other and stay in each other's homes. It was a really, close, tight friendship.

Or so we thought.

Then, one day, "Dee" just disappeared. Previous to his "exodus" from our lives, we would talk on the phone at least once every other week if not more. But, suddenly, when I called, I would just "go" to his voicemail ... and he never called back. So I began writing emails, but never received a reply. So THEN, I started sending cards ... sometimes homemade cards to see if I could get a response. However, it was when I sent a "care package" of toiletries and other things I knew he liked, but never got a response, much less a thanks, I realized the friendship was gone. He had, what we now call "ghosted", Danny and I ... and we never found out why.

Soon after I realized we had parted ways and was feeling despondent, I read something that made me feel better. I read an article from a few years before of an interview that had been done with the wonderful composer, Irving Berlin, on his 100th birthday. The interviewer asked him what he had learned in all his many years. Mr. Berlin said (paraphrasing here), "There is one thing. I have learned that friendships come in seven year cycles. At the end of each cycle, you either move into another cycle, or the friendship fades away, You should not be upset by this. It is just a part of life. It is as natural as breathing".

After I thought about it, I really took Mr. Berlin's words to heart and didn't feel so badly. It struck a chord with me.

That one piece of wisdom has helped guide me through some rocky times ever since.

"Dee" reappeared years later. Although Danny and I have exchanged an occasional email with him and have actually seen him and spoke with him, times have changed ... but in a good way. Even though he never told us what happened, we have a better perspective through age and experience and no longer harbor any hurt feelings. Knowing what we NOW know about the cycle of friendship, we are mollified and coping just fine with that period in our lives.

The rhythm of friendship is just a part of life. I have tried to make at least one of my childhood friends, who I first wrote about, understand that in order to help make him feel better. So far, I'm not sure if he is assuaged.

But, I no longer fret or am dismayed when that closeness is gone. It's natural. I know it is simply a part of this game of life we are all playing.

Although, as a consolation prize for playing the game, I just wish they gave out free popcorn.

You are the sunshine of my life,  
Your pal, Stevie

## Who you callin' ornery?

Ooooooo, I'm afraid I am becoming a grumpy old man. No. Not grumpy. Cranky. You know, the kind that stands on his front porch, shaking his cane at the neighborhood urchins and yelling. "You damn kids get off my lawn!!" (shake, shake, shake). Only I don't use a cane. Let's replace it with a broom. It's much more formidable. "You damn kids ...!" (shake, shake, shake).

As the years pass, I am finding my fuse is a whole lot easier to light. I not proud of it, but that's the way things seem to be developing. I am not sure why, but I can sure think of a whole lot of reasons why this unwanted behavior may be creeping up on me.

For one, I'm old. That's always a good excuse. Crankiness can come with the territory of old age. Maybe I've arrived in the world of codgerdom. If so, I want a ticket to someplace a bit more pleasant; Tahiti, maybe. The painter, Gauguin, did it in his later years. And look at all the great art that came out of that decision to relocate.

Maybe it's genetic. My long suffering mother had a hair-trigger temper. But she ALWAYS had a quick-draw temper, no matter what age she was ... so I can't blame it on age AND genetics. Otherwise, I would have been more snippy in my salad days.

I am diabetic. Hey! Ya know? THAT ain't a bad alibi. Low blood sugar and BLAMMO! You don't know what hit you. But I'm not on insulin and my little Metformin pill isn't enough to cause instant hypoglycemia and send me over the top.

Anxiety from cabin fever? Ahhh, now there's a goood candidate. Not that I mind being cooped up for 9 or 10 months. I pride myself on being able to amuse myself for hours on end. However, it is true, little "pins and pricks" can easily creep into one's subconscious, especially during times of stress (as we are ALL experiencing from politics to the pandemic). But the only anxiety I seem to be aware of "enjoying" these days is in my dreams, where I am about to go on stage and haven't the foggiest idea of what my lines are and everyone hates me to begin with.

Hmmmmmm ....

So, after ruminating about it, I am going to chalk it up to old age after all.

And WHY do I suppose my inner codger is coming to the surface these days? Well, here are three recent occurrences where I paid for a service, but didn't get what I assumed I would receive. Yes, they all were instances where an error was made, but I reacted in, what I would call, an unseemly manner.

Near the end of October, I went to get new glasses because my old frames had broken and my prescription needed to be tweaked. I have trifocals (I TOLD you I was old), so, after a discussion with the technician, I assumed the lenses in my new glasses would be the same. For some reason, they only made bifocal lenses for the new frames.

After about a week, I went back to say “sumpthin’s not right”. Upon examining the new specs, they discovered their error. They apologized and said it would be easily fixed. However it would cost me another \$125.00.

That was when the cranky guy came out. I know I could have or should have played the “nice card”, but, instead, my hackles went up and I “drew my gun”. I kept my voice calm, but I became, shall we say, a bit snippy? They wanted me to pay more for their mistake and Scrooge McCupo rose to the surface.

(Five weeks later and I still don’t have the new glasses. I don’t want to think they are punishing me, because that would make me seem paranoid, which is even worse than being cranky.)

A couple more recent events both happened when my darling Danny and I ordered food so that we could pick it up outside the restaurant. (In these days of high plague, we do that a lot.)

The first promised “excellent service” and we were told our food would be ready at 6:15 on the dot. We arrived early at 6:00 and I notified them by phone (as instructed). At 6:10, a server arrived at our car window to ask if were we there for pickup. When we said we were, she said she would check on it. After 6:15 came and went, I called again at 6:25. The server acted as if she never heard of us. We eventually got our food, but when it came, I was a bit more than snide. I couldn’t help it. The crabby guy was upon me again.

The second food debacle was in the form of an order for pizza, a salad with chicken and a grilled cheese sandwich. Upon our arrival at the designated time, a pizza box and a plastic shopping bag was handed to me with their apologies saying that they forgot to order the chicken for the salad from the kitchen, and we would need to wait. Okay, we waited ... no big deal. When it was ready, the chicken was handed off to us and we went home. Opening our dinner containers, there was no sandwich. Yes, I called them. No, I wasn’t as lovely as I could have been. I went off again: “You damn kids ...!!” (shake, shake, shake).

It sounds so petty, but all three instances made me really angry. What I hate the most about reacting this way is that I get cranky at myself for getting cranky. I abhor the guilt and the angst for not being more patient. The spike of adrenaline gets me all shaky and nauseous. It makes me feel miserable physically, mentally and even spiritually. I want to be a better person. I KNOW I want to be a better person, but, in each instance, Mr. Crankypants reared his ugly head and off I went.

My desire is not to be so mercurial. My hope is to treat others as I would want to be treated. But when I sense I am getting the short end of the stick ... I end up coming off appearing as an “a-hole” and then, afterward, being miserable in my guilt.

I don't remember being this way when I was younger. Maybe I was and was just too immature to be aware of my bad behavior. Perhaps, as I have matured, my self-awareness has "ripened" along with me. Is it possible BECAUSE I am getting older that I have become more aware of my reactions to perceived injustices?

Now that I think of it, I have been pretty cranky these days when watching the news. We are rife with injustice.

So what do I do? What do we do?

Well, baby steps toward being honest with myself is a start. A few steps towards respecting other people is another. A third is trying ... and I mean REALLY trying to understand that none of us is perfect. We all have off days and unwanted emotions. I suppose I need to give others a break, while I am forgiving myself as well.

Soooo ...

Every new day is a fresh start. Inhale, exhale ... time for me to try again.

However, that also means every new day makes me another day older. Oh well. Maybe that's a good thing. Perhaps the passage of time will help make me more self-aware. It could be another new opportunity for making a clean sweep of things and, instead of yelling at "those damn kids", invite them into my house ... socially distanced, of course.

We'd all be a whole lot happier.

Tryin' my best,  
Dr. Cupo/Mr. Hyde

## A fork in the road

I've never been a "what if" kinda guy. Speculating on or fretting about events that could have happened is just not my style. It strikes me as a waste of personal time and energy. Yes, it's good to plan things out and create some advanced ground work. However, I don't burden myself with a "what if I had taken that job" or "suppose I had stayed home that night" or "should I have eaten that six-day-old burrito?". What is done is done. Move on. Second guessing would only add to any anxiety I already carry.

However, as I have been ruminating on my life over these past months, I can't help but re-visit times I have come to a crossroad where I needed to choose a path.

So to show you what kind of hypocrisy I can display, this entire blog-thing chapter is all about contemplating decisions I or some other person made that affected the course of the rest of my life.

There is a theory floating around out there in our big, strange world that is called "The Butterfly Effect". I know most of you have, at least, heard of it. The concept is the idea that a small thing can have a huge impact on a larger system; as in the flap of a butterfly's wing can lead to the start of World War III. Well, I don't think any choice I made will eventually lead to world annihilation. I don't have THAT large an ego. But there have been times in my life where I know, if I had opted for that "other choice", my life's journey would have been completely different from what I am experiencing today.

Some of these tales I have touched on in past writings. However, I am re-introducing them with this perspective in mind.

The first came when I was about to graduate high school in the early Seventies. I needed to choose a college to attend. My options were State University of New York at Geneseo (where I ended up) or North Carolina School of the Arts. The difference was that Geneseo would accept me based on my grade average and SAT scores. Acceptance into the out-of-state School of the Arts was contingent on a successful audition. However, at that time of my life, I was lazy. I was smart enough to do well in school, but too uninterested in really applying myself to go that "extra distance". Even with an adult in the guise of a local actress in Schenectady willing to help me with my scene work, I made only a half-hearted gesture and ended up going down to North Carolina unprepared to offer a strong audition. I decided I would take the easy route and do "some stuff" I already kind of knew. Of course, they didn't take me. However, if I HAD really applied myself, I might have actually been chosen.

My gosh! Not going to Geneseo and not meeting so many of my lifelong friends that influenced the way I think would have been COMPLETELY life altering. One of the biggest changes I can think of is I wouldn't have met fellow student, Jimmy Miller. After

college, Jimmy worked for a theatrical production company who was about to do a tour of "Hair". When they were casting, Jimmy thought of me for one of the roles. After I got the role and did the tour, that eventually led to future employment at a theatre in Kentucky, which led me to meeting my dear friend "Fruma" who needed a roommate in New York City. Little did I know, my inertia back in high school would lead to my life as a New York actor. But, if I had not gone to Geneseo, my life certainly would have arced into a completely different orbit.

What if ...?"

What if, after I was living in New York City for many years and was finally ready to leave, I had not been asked by my old roommate, Leslie, to look after her apartment she was sub-letting while she went away to do summer stock. Or what if I had said "no" to her? You see, it was 1988 and, after eleven years, I had already decided to move to Boston where I had a friend who would give me a box office job and where I had an aunt living relatively close by. However, because I agreed to help out Leslie by getting her mail and picking up the sublet rent check, I was at her apartment at least once a month that summer. I always called ahead to arrange to get the rental check from Rick, the guy who was living in her apartment for that time. We often had a nice chat. He was planning on moving to Washington, DC. After a bit, he asked me if I had ever considered living in DC. My answer was "absolutely not". There were politicians in DC! But, that one conversation changed the trajectory of the rest of my life! I ended up moving to DC with Rick instead of Boston, as I had planned.

If I had moved to Boston, I would have never met my darling Danny and spent thirty years of my life (and counting) with the person I love! Also, when I moved to DC, my acting career flourished. In Boston, I can only imagine I would have probably just stayed working in the box office. But who really knows?

"What if ...?"

When I first moved to DC, I knew only two people: Rick, who I lived with and Fruma, my old friend from Kentucky and New York City. After a few months, I really felt lonely. I even contemplated moving back to my hometown of Schenectady, NY. Meanwhile, Rick met a man named Jay. They hit it off so well, Jay ended up moving in with us. Rick and Jay liked to go to a gay bar that was "country western" themed. The big appeal was the freedom to be able to dance with your partner and your partner was another man. One Saturday, they could see how down I was, so they practically begged me to go to the bar with them. They knew I needed to get out of the house and "out of my head". I was very reluctant because I had memories of the competitive nature of the bars in New York City. After much cajoling, I finally relented, much against my better judgment. Because of that one decision, I met a man in the bar who soon became my best buddy, Leon. Leon took me to his church and introduced me to his best friend ... the

one and only ... my darling Danny. I can't help but think, "what if ...". What if I had wallowed in my self-pity and had not gone out that night?

"What if ...?"

Then, what if when, during the run of "Cabaret" in DC in 1995, I had decided to make a dramatic change in my new life in DC and actually return to New York City after the show was over? You see, when we were running the show, by coincidence, the New York Times theatre critic came to Washington, DC to do an article on theatre in Washington. Of the many shows running, he decided to come to our production of "Cabaret". The next thing I knew, my picture was on the front page of The New York Times Sunday Style Section, under which was a rave review of our show and ... well ... me. It was then I received a call from a very well-known theatrical agent whose clients were among the elite of New York stage and television. He asked to be my agent. Usually it takes years to even get in to see any agent, let alone him, but here he was on my phone, in person, wanting to represent me.

I said "no". I had made a home in DC, loved my Danny and didn't want to commute back and forth to New York City. Besides, after living in the "Big Apple" for eleven years, I had "a bad taste in my mouth". But, even as that "no" came out of my lips, I knew I had made a decision as to what pathway I would now walk. However, "what if"? Would I have become really successful and almost famous if I had said "yes" instead? But, I had chosen. I couldn't look back.

Oh, but, "what if ....?"

Danny made a tiny decision one day in his life that did have a GIGANTIC effect on our lives. It practically is proof of the truth behind "The Butterfly Effect".

Danny worked in the main building of the US Department of Agriculture. That building has one of the largest capacities of office space of a non-high rise in the entire country. The building is absolutely enormous. One day, Danny was walking down one of the long hallways and passed a veterinarian he somewhat knew because she worked in the same department he did. As he walked by her, he spontaneously complimented her on her earrings. That one brief gesture became a long-lived friendship with our friend, Bonnie. After many years, when Bonnie's parents passed away, we were the people who bought her parents' home in Tucson, Arizona. If Danny hadn't made that tiny expression in that hallway all those years ago, we would not be sitting in our dream home in paradise today.

But, what if he had simply walked by her? What if? Would we still be in DC? Because of Dan's high-level position and potential conflict with the incoming politicians, would he have been transferred to podunk Idaho? Who knows?

That just shows my point. We DON'T know. And that is as it should be. Maybe somewhere in some parallel universes, I am petting my cat in my studio apartment in

Boston, or living the highlife between Broadway and Beverly Hills. Or maybe, Danny and I are pushing up daisies in the mid-west somewhere. It doesn't matter. What does matter is we both made decisions and we both moved on.

There is a song I love to sing and makes me cry (when and if I sing these days) whose closing lyrics perfectly represent this philosophy:

“If I had changed a single day, what went amiss or went astray, I may have never found my way to you. I wouldn't change a thing that happened on my way to you”.

Je ne regrette rien,  
Etienne (Stevie)

## Relatively speaking

My poor father tells the story of his mother's sister, whom the family called Auntie Vera. Auntie Vera and Dad were sitting next to each other at the wake of her other sister, Auntie Tess. A lady was sitting on the other side of Auntie Vera and struck up a conversation with her. Dad said they spoke for well over twenty minutes. When the woman finally got up to go over to the coffin in order to pay her respects, Dad asked Auntie Vera, "who was that"? Auntie Vera replied, I don't know. Somebody we know".

I LOVE that story!

Auntie Vera was Dad's mother's favorite sister. They were near each other in age, with my grandmother being the slightly older one.

Auntie Vera's real first name was Elvira. None of the sisters went by their given names. They all had nicknames. My grandmother, Mary, was Mae, Elvira was Vera, Theresa was Tess and Edith was Edie. I was never sure why, but they seemed more comfortable answering to their sobriquets than their "real" names. Also, they all bore the appellation of "Auntie", instead of "aunt". I always thought it made them sound more convivial than plain old "Aunt So-and-So". "Aunt Elvira" conjures the image of a stone-faced prude, dressed in gray, with her hair tied back in a tight bun. However "Auntie Vera" brings to mind a sweet woman in a warm kitchen that radiated with wonderful aromas.

Auntie Vera and her husband, Jim Sennes and their only son, Gene lived next door to my father and his family for the first ten or so years of my Dad's life. The two families might have just as well lived in the same house for all the time they spent with each other. Even when my Dad's family moved about a ten minute drive away, the households remained inseparable.

The two sisters, however, were very different from each other. While my grandmother was quite pretty and easy to talk to, Auntie Vera was a bit plain faced and very quiet. But, when they "got together", it was as if they were identical twins. They could finish each other's sentences and seem to know what the other one was thinking at any moment. My grandmother loved to laugh. Auntie Vera was funny, but not on purpose. She had this hilarious ability of being funny simply by how she worded things. Her comment at her sister Tess's wake is a perfect example. She may not have been clever, but she was so endearing.

They were Italian and Albanian in heritage. They spoke Italian and, of course, English (with a heavy New York City accent, being they were raised where Lincoln Center now stands). Usually, when they both spoke, it was in English, but if there was food involved, they would switch to Italian. However, if they were gossiping together,

either in person or on the phone, and if any of us kids walked into the house, they would immediately change to Albanian. That was so no one knew what or, more significantly, WHO they were talking about.

The two sisters shared an incredible talent for cooking. (As a matter of fact, all four sisters were amazing home chefs.) My grandmother was spectacular in her ability to create glorious Italian food. But, I have to say, Auntie Vera was a complete epicurean genius when it came to her talents in the kitchen. Her meatballs were manna from Heaven. And both women were always prepared with (a) a pot of spaghetti sauce and (b) a soup of some kind simmering on the stove at any time of the day. You can only imagine the aromas that you were immersed in when you walked into either house. More often than not, one suddenly found oneself at the kitchen table with a bowl of escarole soup under one's nose.

As I said earlier, Auntie Vera was married to Uncle Jim. Uncle Jim was a large, easy-going gentleman of a guy with an Italian accent due to the fact that he was born in Italy. He was very quiet, and also very sweet. He was a welder at the General Electric plant in Schenectady, but, in spite of his occupation, he played the banjo and loved music. A man of few words, he still liked to remain part of what was going on around him. The room may have been filled with conversation, but a nod of Uncle Jim's head was enough for everyone to know he was participating. Although, if there was music, he would always heartily sing along. I, also, remember he sported a flat-top haircut as a way of expressing his desire to be "stylish". When it came to curb appeal, he was meticulous about his yard and seemed to be forever painting and repainting their house.

Although, poor Uncle Jim had a condition that plagued him all his life.

Once, when the two families were visiting their siblings in Yonkers, they all went to the Bronx Zoo. They had gone through the reptile house and were continuing on when they realized Uncle Jim wasn't with them. They went back into the reptile building and found him frozen in front of one of the exhibits with snakes.

If Uncle Jim saw a snake, even on television, he would become completely catatonic. It took a while for him to "snap out of it". I knew, even as a small child, if Uncle Jim was frozen in front of the T.V. set, it meant he had seen a snake on the screen and I was to let him alone in order to give him time to "come back to himself".

Their son, Gene, ended up being a great friend of my Dad's. As a matter of fact, Gene was best man at my parents' wedding. He was a very dapper fella; tall with black hair and a stylish mustache. He was an optician by day, but, like his father, loved music and was a working musician for most of his life. I remember his stand-up bass being stored in his parents' home for years.

It was Gene's talent as a musician that probably saved his life.

Gene enlisted into the army in 1942 near the start of World War II. Most of the guys from Schenectady ended up being assigned to the same Division. After boot camp, they were all shipped to Honolulu, Hawaii to await further assignment. While there, a request went out from the “higher ups” for musicians to play in the army band. Gene played several instruments, beside the bass, and readily volunteered. After being accepted, his superiors acknowledged his proficiency and offered him a position to create and lead a dance band for the benefit of the officers at a swank hotel in Honolulu.

Meanwhile, the rest of Gene’s Division was sent to Guadalcanal only to end up in one of the bloodiest battles of the War. Approximately two thirds of Gene’s fellow soldiers were killed. Thanks to Gene’s prowess, he spent the War living in a hotel in Hawaii, conducting a big band for the enjoyment of the military.

The irony was never lost on him, but it never weighed him down. He lived his life with a bravado and appreciation for the gift of life he was given.

After the War, Gene married a truly wonderful woman named Mary Ellen and blessed his parents with two grandsons.

The Sennes’ were a happy part of my childhood. I will never forget their fortitude and love for their family, both immediate and extended. Auntie Vera, in particular, shared a quiet devotion with her loved ones, without being ostentatious or overbearing. Her quiriness made her all the more endearing. Of course, it was all based in love. And, after all, isn’t that what you would hope family is all about?

A devoted relative,  
Little Stevie

## We deliver ...

Ever since this COVID-19 thang hit us in the early part of 2020, we all have gone “ordering online” crazy.

Don't get me wrong, I think it's a swell idea. It keeps us all more socially distanced when purchasing our Gucci bags or Tiffany necklaces. Plus, we no longer need to mingle with the riff-raff.

Whatever ...

Truth be told, shopping online ain't a bad idea. It certainly is convenient having items delivered directly to our doorsteps. My darling Danny and I have been religiously buying most of our stuff online for many a year now. Personally, I have discovered that I can more likely find what I am searching for on the pages of my iPad than on the shelves of a brick-and-mortar store.

We actually are extra fortunate here in Tucson. We recently discovered that Amazon has one of their largest distribution centers, serving the Southwest, right here in little ol' Tucson. When we order on Amazon, we almost always get it the next day. And, because we belong to their “exclusive” Amazon Prime, delivery sometimes occurs the same day ... and with no shipping costs.

Ahhh, the convenience of spending one's money.

Danny and I have gotten spoiled by free home delivery. Need a new pen? Order it. Flip flops worn out? Pick out a new pair. Toilet paper? You betcha!

Although, these days, you gotta watch out for what exactly it is you are buying. Early on in the pandemic, when it was impossible to find a square of toilet paper in any store, we thought we'd be clever and just get some online. We were feeling kind-a smug when we found them on the web. However, our self-satisfied smiles were wiped off our faces when our “pack” of toilet paper arrived. It was six rolls that were so toy sized, they looked as though a family of twelve had already gone through most of them. It seemed as though all we were getting were those last few sheets that are stuck to the center cardboard.

In this case, I think the problem was that we ordered from a foreign dealer in the vast unknown ether, rather than good old reliable Amazon Prime.

I heard on the radio, in the first few months of the pandemic, Amazon's sales jumped 37%.

I have an idea! With that HUGE Coronavirus Relief check you are getting, why not invest in Amazon in the stock market? The heck with paying rent or groceries. Stocks, baby!

Hey, speaking of groceries, Danny and I tried that “order online and have your groceries brought directly to your car” that some stores are offering these days. Great on concept; not so good in practice. We tried it a couple of times, but the last attempt we did resulted in only about a third of the stuff we wanted in the bags. Yes, they were cheerfully willing to refund anything they gave us as a substitute. But when two thirds of the stuff gets taken back, you might as well take your chances dodging your way through the masses in the aisles in order to get that name brand you’ve always been willing to pay more for.

Sometimes, you don’t have to use the web in order to get an item delivered.

We recently bought a four drawer, wood (if particle board counts as wood) filing cabinet at OfficeMax. It wasn’t in stock, but they said they would deliver it to us when it “came in”. Thank GOODNESS for the delivery gods. If I had tried to carry that thing out of the store and lift it into my car, I would have busted a nut! As it was, after it was delivered, I had to dismantle the container piece by piece in order to get it into the room where it was to be assembled.

OH!

The caveat about having larger items delivered to your home is you had better be prepared to pull out your tool kit in order to put the thing together. Now, I’m lucky. I have that Cupo “I-like-to-put-together-puzzles” head. So, making sense out of thirty thousand pieces of wood, metal and hardware is fun for me. It completely appeals to my OCD brain as I carefully lay out each screw, nail and fragment before thoughtfully bringing it all together. However, I know there are those of you out there who would just as soon poke yourself in the eye with one of those nails than attempt to summon your moxie to make some sense out of all those fragments. Maybe home delivery for some things isn’t exactly for the likes of you.

All that said, with the huge influx of EVERYBODY now buying online, the reliability of one’s “convenient” consignment is not so ... well ... reliable. Apparently, the big shippers like USPS, UPS and FedEx are subcontracting out to some (shall I say?) less responsible organizations. One is never really sure who will be walking up one’s walkway to bring one one’s package ... if it comes at all.

Christmas was a bit shaky this year when it came to the prompt arrival of gifts. Maybe some of Santa’s elves got COVID and the work load got backlogged.

The week before Christmas, Danny ordered some coins for me through the US Mint. It has become a tradition for him to give me the “Proof Set” of the newest coins along with some special coins honoring a particular person or event. Anyway, they ended up arriving the first week of January. Not quite in time for a gleeful unwrapping Christmas morning.

A friend of ours sent us a cheesecake from Junior's Cheesecake located in New York City. We are STILL waiting for that to arrive. I'm hoping the mold will add some extra flavor.

Although, I must say, sometimes the system still works ... sort of.

Along with the coins from the US Mint, a large package arrived. Upon opening, it turned out to be wooden T.V. trays painted in a lovely antique green. I was the one doing the opening and Danny was out riding his bike, so I supposed they were something else he ordered for us for Christmas. I figured our holiday packages were, at long last, all arriving together at the same time. Inspecting the open box, I saw there was some assembly required. As per my wonts, I carefully laid out all the pieces and hardware for assembly. Before putting the pieces together, I dutifully broke down the box and various pieces of cardboard so they would fit in our recycle bin. After that was done, I, excitedly leapt into action, assembling the jumble of pieces. I was just completing the last of it when Danny came home from his ride. Oddly, he said he didn't remember ordering the trays, but, now that he was retired, he may have because he had been reorganizing his home office and they were something he might need. The confusing thing was that we already owned a set of wooden T.V. trays, some of which he already was using in his office. After a bit of back and forth between us, I decided to look at the shipping label. Returning to the garage, I dug out the box I had just neatly folded up and taped. Pulling it apart, the mystery was solved. It was for the neighbor six houses down from us.

Well ... at least a delivery was made ... just to the wrong address. (It led me to wonder which neighbor might have enjoyed our missing cheesecake.)

After notifying the real owners of the T.V. trays, we were ready to make our own delivery to them. But they were quicker than we and arrived at our front door. It turned out the wife was SO grateful I had already put the thing together. She repeated several times over how her husband hated doing that sort of stuff and it was a "marriage saver".

Which got me to thinking. I could create a whole new career for myself. If someone wants something delivered that needs assembling, but dreads doing it, they could send it to my house instead and I will put it together for them. Then I would deliver it myself ... maybe in my little golf cart which has a fold-out flat bed under the back seat! All the work will be done, I will have made a little profit for my troubles and everyone will be happy.

Now, I just require a snappy uniform in shocking blue to match the cart. I also need a catchy "come on". I think I will borrow Danny's dad's logo from his part-time electrician business: "Don't Cuss. Call Us".

How can I service you?

Ready to deliver,  
Your personal handyman

## In the garden of good and evil

Good and evil.

As odd as it sounds, sometimes what people think is good and what is evil is all a matter of perspective.

(Gee, I wonder what is leading me to write that at THIS moment?)

Years from now, if anyone finds the crumbling, printed pages of this blog-thing (yes, I print them out) stashed in the back of my walk-in closet of my house in Arizona ... and are reading this in the year 2075, I am referring to the infamous storming of the Capitol building in Washington, DC at the end of President Trump's term in January 2021.

Now, in the past, I have written how I don't wish to include politics in these blogs. I am not naive enough to believe anything I say will sway anyone in any direction whatsoever. Plus, politics and religion are the death knell of any civilized tête-à-tête. But SAYING I don't want to write about something, but end up addressing the self-forbidden subject anyway, seems to be something I am doing a lot these days.

However, I promise, no ranting here. Just some observations that have recently come to the forefront of my pea-brain because of this recent drama.

First, just to get it off my chest: I am HORRIFIED at what occurred. Whether you feel the same way is what I will soon be getting at. But I will say it again: HORRIFIED.

Then, like the true optimist I try to be, I find myself giving thanks for all my years living in Washington, DC (and thanking the Good Lord I don't live there now), for giving me the coping mechanism to emotionally deal with the atrocities at hand.

You see, while living there, ALL kinds of awful events happened, from marches that weren't in my political realm to police actions that seemed, at the time, grossly inappropriate. After being there for a while and experiencing some not-so-nice occurrences, I learned to "swing with the punches". I found that after a period of personal indignation, the dust settled and we all went back (or NEEDED to go back) to our regular routines.

Looking at the recent atrocities at the Capitol, that old voice inside of me said, "This, too, shall pass" and I was able to get through the rest of the day without feeling nauseous.

HOWEVER ...

My gut observation regarding the incident was (verbalizing here), "this is a battle of good versus evil". As I saw it, the rioters were driven by a desire to prove their belief of a false election result by destroying what we know as an established Democracy. Democracy, again to me, in its purest form, falls into the sphere of "good stuff".

But then (yes, there is a “But then”), the following morning, while conducting my morning ablutions while listening to NPR (as is my usual morning habit), I heard a reporter interviewing one of the Trump supporters who was there to protest. This man had come from Connecticut to show his solidarity with others who were upset with the results of the election. Although he did not participate in the storming of the Capitol, he agreed with what the invading hordes were doing. His words were, “It’s a battle of good versus evil”.

I dropped my razor in the sink.

Those were the very words I had been thinking! Only now they were turned on their head.

He went on to say he felt that there was so much evil happening within the established government, it had become a Divine battle of right versus wrong.

Good versus evil.

IS it a matter of perspective? Is the “good” that is so obvious to me, so horribly “evil” to others? And vice versa?

Listening to that guy on the radio was so discombobulating, it made my head hurt.

Does it really come down to one’s perspective?

(I have approached this subject of perspective before ... in one of my written wanderings months ago ... but it has raised its ugly head again.)

Does my thinking something is good, truly make it good? And evil??? I don’t hardly want to go there.

But I will.

Here’s some context for you to make you even more consternated.

I knew a couple who were originally from Germany. They were my parents age and, indeed, were like second parents to me. But more than that, they were dear friends who were intensely near to my heart. (I am writing of them in the past tense because they have both passed away.)

The facts surrounding their lives addresses this idea of perspective.

The couple (Mr. and Mrs.) came to the US from Germany in the early 1950’s. However, their formative years coincided with the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party. As a teenager, Mr. was a mountain climber for the Nazi war machine. Mrs. became a member of Hitler-Jugend (Hitler Youth). Their whole early lives had been immersed in the Nazi “way”. Growing up, they truly knew of nothing else. When the war was over and they moved to America, they attempted to leave all that behind them. They wanted a new start; a fresh beginning. These “renewed” people were the ones I knew and came to love.

Then, one Christmas vacation, during my college years, sometime in the early 1970’s, I went over to their house one evening. It was just the three of us: Mr. and Mrs.

and me. We had a truly wonderful evening reminiscing and laughing a lot. Mr. kept serving cocktails of all kinds and, after a while, we were all feeling pretty tipsy. It was then, the conversation somehow became about “the Jews”. After a bit of Mr.’s not so flattering “observations”, I found that I had stopped laughing. He suddenly got up, went into the master bedroom and came back with a copy of Hitler’s book, “Mein Kampf”. I was shocked. His next comment froze my blood: “Hitler wasn’t all bad. He did a lot of good things for the country”.

I won’t go on with the story. And I won’t judge them here. However, hopefully, you can see my point. They had always been so kind, loving and generous to me. I adored them. But from what my life’s experiences told me, what was being spoken about was the antithesis of good. NO, Mr. and Mrs. weren’t evil. They grew up with evil. So ... their perspectives were skewed. What I saw as horrifying (there’s that word again), they viewed as “life”. Did that make them “bad” people?

Which brings me back to “good and evil”.

I am learning, just because we think something is good or bad, there will always be someone with a polar opposite view of the same circumstances. Who is right? Who gets to claim the truth?

After much thought on this, I found an overly simple answer. We need to step back from any situation and see what is the intent and what are the final results.

Hitler used his rise to power to benefit some of the population, while wreaking carnage on others. History shows us that, yes, he helped restore Germany to wealth and power, but he did it with the virtual destruction of a huge part of humanity. It was obviously evil in intent and the results were unimaginably tragic.

That is what one would call historical perspective.

And the rioters at the Capitol? Well, they weren’t exactly the Nazi party, but they were bent on destruction. We know from history that the intention to destroy and wreak havoc is bad; and steeped in malice. If that is one’s intention, then, yes, it is evil. On the other hand, if your life’s experience persuades you the intent of that destruction it is for the good of something, then your perspective tells you it’s okay. (I won’t get into the morality of it). Historically speaking, it’s not correct. It’s misguided ... or, as I’ve said ... skewed ... but maybe that doesn’t make you a completely evil person. As appalling as it looks to others, you are doing what you think is good.

Look, I know I am not any sort of expert on the subject. But this has been laying heavy on my heart. I needed to make some sense of what was happening and what better way than to “get it all out” through this blog-thing? (Thank you for your time ... doctors.)

Just remember, there are always two sides to every story. Each side is certain they are right and the other is wrong. I suppose that is human nature. Maybe the solution (or,

at least a partial solution) is stepping back and looking at what is best for EVERYONE and not just your “side”. Perhaps, taking this sort of perspective can be the optimal barometer.

Now people simply need to learn how to “read” the thing.

Keeping track of the weather,  
Your storm chaser

## The icks

Did you ever get “The icks”?

Most of you might know what I am talking about. It’s that vague, self-imposed insecurity of feeling uncertain, uncomfortable or regretful about something you said, did or didn’t do.

“The icks.”

I’ve had them so much in my life, I gave them the name of “The icks”. They follow me around like a pack of stray dogs that are always looking to devour a scrap of sustenance; that sustenance being my self-worth.

The feeling will often arise after I have been at a gathering of some kind. When I get back home, I begin to think back on the event. My obsessive brain will replay observations I made that may have not been all that fruitful or a snappy comment that fell a little flat. My thoughts even go as far as second guessing who I spoke to and with whom I didn’t spend time. By the time I am “washing off the evening” in my shower, I am mentally and emotionally exhausted.

“The icks”.

You would think, by THIS time in my life, my old age would have tempered those feelings of self-doubt. It’s something one would imagine an acne’d adolescent would be suffering through. However, at 66 years old, “The icks” still arise in me. Although, thankfully, in this stage of the last viable years of my life, I don’t get them so badly. BUT, sadly ... they still occur.

Yuck. “The icks”.

All kinds of situations can bring them on.

For example, the group scenario mentioned above.

“Ick”.

Or the time I accidentally introduced one of my best friends by the wrong name!

“Ick”.

Or when I agreed to do a project, but, after frittering away the time, didn’t put my full heart and soul into it.

“Ick”.

Or “The super-duper ick” I got from the time a dear friend, who had helped me so much when I was sick, became terminally ill themselves. For whatever reason on my part ... procrastination, fear, depression ... I didn’t return the favor. Then, even before I had the chance to send a card, my friend died.

Super-duper “ick”.

One could call my reactions, guilt. But it goes deeper than that. It's a lingering, deep-seated sense of feeling I am a bad person.

Look, I truly know I am NOT a bad guy. It's the inner demons that tell me I am. My crazy insecurity drives those voices and stops me from being content with who I am or what I did or what I said.

"The icks."

Paradoxically, living through a time of pandemic is that we are all forced to limit our time and exposure to other people. Interactions are greatly curtailed. Believe me, the irony of not having to experience "The icks" due to the deprivation of human contact is not lost on me. How twisted is that?

Although, I still, occasionally, get "zinged" by them on Zoom calls in which I participate.

So. How do I beat "The icks"?

I meditate. I pray. I think good thoughts. I think of how sure I am everybody gets them and no one is perfect. I laugh at myself. Many times, I call them out for what they are. I will literally stand in the middle of a room and say, "I got 'The icks' again. Go away". Sometimes, just by doing that, the apprehension dissipates a bit.

Then I go on with my life.

Luckily, being that I am aware "The icks" are conjured up only by me, I can "unconjure" them as well. The torment I invoke can be reversed. Like all of us, I just need to remember I am worthy of self-respect. I know I deserve to live in peace within myself, just as we all deserve to live in peace with each other.

If only those mental insurrectionists would stop trying to break down the doors in my brain.

Fighting the good fight,  
This perfectly imperfect friend

## It's only a number

In her later years, movie icon Bette Davis once famously said, "Old age isn't for sissies". When Joan Crawford was interviewed by McCall's Magazine in the mid-1960's and was asked if she had any regrets, she replied, "Getting old".

It's interesting these two long-time rivals and adversaries found common ground in their takes on the aging process. I imagine if you had been known most of your life for your looks, having that slowly taken from you can sting a bit. I'm not saying that folks "of a certain age" can't be attractive, I'm just maintaining what I believe these two ladies were basically getting at: getting older physically HURTS!

As I've inched my way past middle age, I have found that my little body has made a silent plan to remind me of all the indignities I laid on it in my youth.

First, beginning in my 40's, I noticed my feet and ankles cracked so badly when I got out of bed in the morning the noise sounded like fireworks going off. As time passed, the crackling was soon followed by out and out pain when my feet hit the floor. (What a surprise!) Over time, the morning aches crept up my legs, affecting my knees and then my hips. It took a good 15 to 20 minutes before the cacophony and the vexation subsided.

But these "ouchies" weren't necessarily gone for the rest of the day. If I got up from a chair too fast or pivoted too quickly, I was very promptly reminded by a twinge that I was no longer in my free-flowing 20's.

I remember (again, in my 40's) doing a musical called "Follies". It was decided, for our own entertainment and to celebrate the birthday of our director, we would create a "Follies" follies. This would be a music review parodying the songs from the show. A guy in the chorus, who was in his early 20's, was pegged to choreograph one of the group numbers. At one point, he wanted all the men to fall to the ground on "count one", then jump up on "count two". Any of us who were over 40, just laughed. There was no WAY we could even imagine doing such a move without experiencing, at best, extreme discomfort or, at worst, bodily harm. He was confused by our derision. Obviously he had not yet "enjoyed" the realities of living in an older body. Thankfully, he came up with a more age appropriate approach.

Another musical that I was in, which had a lot of dancing, saw three of us who were hovering around 40 years of age on the floor before every show diligently moaning and groaning as we stretched ourselves into getting ready to do the performance. Meanwhile, the "young things" in the cast would flit by, do a kick or two for a warm-up and skip onto the stage. The three of us would just look at each other and shake our heads.

Of course, as the years passed, it got worse.

Nowadays, how many times have I just been standing in my kitchen and a knee goes out? No reason; just “because”. Or getting out of a car and the hip decides it is happy where it had been and let’s me know with a sudden “screaming” cramp where there just had been peace and quiet.

Sheesh!

In addition, for those in the dark, the older body doesn’t heal as snappily as it used to. I know two friends who had both their knees replaced with artificial devises. The first operation for both friends took place when they were in their 60’s. The second, when they were in their 70’s. The first operation and rehab went fairly smoothly and they both were on their feet (literally) in no time. However, for their second procedures while in their 70’s, that ten year gap made a huge difference in their recoveries. With one, bouncing back took twice as long. The other friend never fully recovered and now walks with a cane.

Come oooooon, body! A little respect here!

That ol’ devil time affects us in other ways as well.

Do I need to even go into the “what did I come into this room for” syndrome? Where do those brain cells go??? And, oh, the names I have forgotten and places I have “misplaced” in my brain. That said, I do find some consolation knowing that EVERYBODY has those same lapses. Or, at least, I think we do.

But the most distressing seems to be when the abilities that you think characterized you eventually fade away. I have a friend who is in her 80’s who laments how she can’t sing like she used to. It makes her sad. I try to assure her she is lucky she can still sing at ALL! But, it IS disconcerting when, all your life, you have defined yourself by certain talents or skills. However, over time, you can’t do them as well any more ... or you can’t do them at all. You begin to ask yourself, “Who am I”?

Well, I can tell you who you are. You are still you. Your life experience is what defines you. Meaning your life’s trials and resulting courage and wisdom are what define you. As long as your synapses are still snapping you just need to remember when your body betrays you, your spirit is intact.

Every morning, as I am creaking and crackling around the bedroom, I have a reassuring conversation with myself I am still the same person. I put myself into a positive frame of mind by convincing myself I may not be able to do “that”, but I CAN do “this”. Then when I make my bed, using it as a warm-up for the rest of the day, I am quite smug that I have accomplished something constructive.

Thank goodness, I get to eat my breakfast sitting down.

Young at heart, The old guy

## Critters, varmints and vermin (Part 1: Present day)

When my darling Danny and I decided to move to a lovely 55 and older retirement community just north of the city of Tucson, little did we know we were moving into the middle of a zoo.

In one of my brief “I’m taking a vacation” blog-things a few months ago, I touched on the fact that we are in the midst of a menagerie of wild animals. It’s true. And we are reminded of it almost every day.

The back of our house faces a “wash”, which consists of a long ditch surrounded by an extended stretch of original flora that was here before the houses were built. I call it “the animal highway”. Wild things tend to use it as a conveyance to get from one part of the suburb to another ... without having to bump into any of us nasty humans. Not a day goes by, we don’t see something that most citified folks only see in a cage.

First are the two “brands” of deer; the so-called white-tailed deer (because their tails are ... guess the answer) and the mule deer (because their ears are long and look like they belong on a ... guess the other answer). Their favorite pastime is to wait until they think nobody is looking, then hop our low cement block fence and chow down on our bushes. I get frustrated, but hey ... the animals were here first. And it’s a treat every once in a while to see a stag with a full “rack” wandering by.

Naturally, we get the little fellas as well: bunnies and quails. We have LOTS of bunnies, because they breed like ... wait for it ... bunnies. And tons of quails, because they breed like ... well ... quails. And those quail chicks are FAST! They are about the size of a golf ball, but run like a super-sonic jet! One speck of danger and they are off like an Indy 500 race car heading toward the checkered flag.

We do have bird feeders out, in spite of our Association asking folks to refrain from feeding the wild life. The fear being the seed (and the birds) will attract other creatures. We rebel because we love seeing the unexpected variety of avian friends here in Arizona. That’s because we are on a major migration route between the U.S. and Mexico. One favorite is the southwest version of a cardinal. It’s name is a mouthful: pyrrhuloxia. We can never remember the name, so we call it “the dinosaur bird”, not because of its appearance, but because the appellation sounds like something some paleontologist would name a dinosaur. Anyway, is not as red as a typical cardinal, but is a mix of red and gray with a little black around the eyes. Very striking.

Speaking of birds ... “Meep, Meep!” We get road runners running to eat those speed demon baby quails. No wonder those chicks move so fast. Speaking of dinosaurs, a road runner resembles what you would imagine its prehistoric ancestor would look like. With a long sharp beak, long taloned legs and equally long tail feathers, they

resemble a very large wood pecker on steroids. They are fearless when it comes to their Homo sapien neighbors. They will practically come right up to you in search of their next meal. Thankfully, we are too hefty to tempt them.

Coyotes are also notorious for ignoring the human element while searching for food. They walk through the yard or down the street as if they are selling crack and have the protection of local gangs. When our palm trees are in season, the coyotes come right up to the house to eat the palm nuts. Our type of palms grow low, so, more often than not, I will look out my bedroom window and see a coyote actually climbing the tilted trunk of the tree to get at the nuts. Coyotes also like to eat the neighbors' pets. Around here, leaving one's cute little Yorkie out in the yard to get some sun and exercise is a REALLY bad idea. As a matter of fact, the couple who lived in our house before us lost a toy poodle when the man let the poor dog out into the yard to do its "business". In an instant, a coyote grabbed it and ... I won't go on, except to say the owners buried what was left of it in the corner of our backyard, along with the remains of some of their other dogs who didn't meet quite such a gruesome end. (We can never get anything to grow in that corner. We think it's the dearly departed canine curse.)

Then there are the javelinas. These are peccaries that resemble wild pigs. Aggressive and hairy, they mostly only come out at night. Although we don't see them very often, you can smell them. The odor is much like that of a septic tank that has backed up and left one's lawn all squishy with effluents. "Lovely" on a warm summer's evening breeze. When Danny and I first moved here, we arranged all kinds of gayly potted cacti on glass and iron tables on our front patio. One morning, we came out and the entire area was trashed. Pots were smashed, tables overturned and many of the cacti were simply gone. It was the javelinas' version of having a midnight snack. We always wondered why no one else had the same sort of charming display as we. After that, we learned our lesson. Now our front patio consists of metal sculptures of galvanized steel and barbed wire that look like cacti. Take THAT you dang javelinas!

And THEN there are the cats. I don't mean, "Here, kitty, kitty, purr, purr" cats. I am talking about felines that you usually only see on programs like "The Wild Kingdom".

First, there are the bobcats. (Here in Arizona, they are known as wildcats). They are about the proportion of a medium sized dog. Tawny, spotted things with a "bobbed" tail. (And you always wondered how they got their name!). These guys live in and among the homes, but avoid people like the plague. You might find one lounging on the cement wall between you and your neighbor's house, but open a door for a closer look and all you will see is that abbreviated tail rocketing off into the distance.

However that doesn't mean there can't be an accidental close encounter. I like to tell the story (over and over ...) about the time Danny was sunning himself in our back

yard. He was sitting on a chair with his legs stretched out and resting on the edge of a standing fire “pit” we have. I was talking on the phone with my brother John about an important surgery he had just had. Looking out the window, I could see Danny’s full body in side view. As I was talking and gazing out the back windows, I saw a large bobcat come into our back yard from the right. It slowly crossed the yard, getting closer and closer to Danny, whose back was to the cat. I started to wave my hands to get Danny’s attention while my brother kept on with his saga. The cat somehow didn’t see or smell Danny and kept getting nearer to him. Very quickly, I was frantically gesticulating to get Danny to see me, but his eyes were closed. As I was about to tell my brother I “NEEDED TO GO!”, the cat sped up and walked right under Danny’s outstretched legs! It was then that Danny felt something under him, saw the cat, clapped his hands and apparently startled the poor animal as much as the thing did Danny. Thank goodness, it just bounded off over the wall instead of turning and fighting. Can you imagine??? Danny said, just beforehand, he smelled a strong musky odor. Glad the cat didn’t decide to mark his territory on Danny!

I do have to tell you, though, bobcat kittens are soooooo cute! Every once in a while, we see them being carried by the nape of their necks in and around our yard by the mommy cat. Apparently, however, they too are vicious and are not to be messed with. Cute doesn’t equal tame.

Which leads me to our last animal that is certainly not to be “messed with”: the mountain lion. Otherwise known as a puma. The powers-that-be of our Association have posted warning signs at all the entrances alerting the populace of said kitties. People are speculating, because of the horrible fire we had this summer in the mountains, the cat population has moved into our area for a better choice of meals. And those meals aren’t necessarily somebody’s pet! The cats have been seen all around the ‘hood this past fall and winter. And, even though they usually are solitary beasts, they have been hunting in packs. A picture was posted recently of three mountain lions together in a neighbor’s back yard. Whee! That would make me think twice about going out to check on the bird feeders.

However, as I’ve said, all these animals were here first. We are the invaders. They are just keeping up the status quo. I believe it is really not our place to try to eradicate them.

That said, I won’t go into the rattlesnakes Danny often encounters while riding his horse. Or the viper found under our next door neighbor’s propane gas tank. Or the live tarantula brought inside the house by the dog of another neighbor. Or the scorpion infestation in the garage of the neighbor living on the other side of us.

Peaceful coexistence is one thing. Having our yard sprayed every other month in order to avoid needing to deal with such things is just plain sensible.

Growing up, however, I did come face to face with a whole bunch of fauna. They consisted of the small four legged kind, but there were also the six and eight legged variety. I'll give you the low down on those encounters in my next writing.

(Eeeeeeeewwwww!)

In the meantime, the moral of today's tale is when you attempt to bring urban sprawl into the remote country, the denizens aren't likely to go away. Most likely, they will be there long after you are gone. Just remember to respect your new neighbors. Hopefully, they will return the favor by not eating you.

Hearing the call of the wild,  
Jack London

## Critters, varmints and vermin (Part 2: The Past)

So. After all my observations of the “anumalz” here in Tuck-son, Areezoner, I gots to thinkin’ about more brief encounters I’ve had with some of God’s other creatures. However, except for an occasional bear sighting in West Virginia or some Magellanic penguins on an island off the coast of South America, not many confrontations stirred my loins as much as the close-up-and-personal sightings here in my own back yard.

That is, until I recalled some past brushes I had with creatures smaller than a breadbox (do “they” still make bread boxes?) with 4, 6 or 8 legs or some having no legs at all. Yes, I am talkin’ about the creepy-crawlies of your darkest nightmares.

And, oh goody, that is what I will be sharing with you here!

I have always had a slight aversion to spiders and snakes. The insecure feeling I get is not a true phobia. It’s more of a ooky, shaky feeling of “all is not right with my world”. As I got older, snakes stopped bothering me as much, but spiders ... hoo boy ... spiders still have a “special” place in my fragile psyche.

Though, when one encounters otherwise non-threatening entities in extraordinarily large numbers, one can suffer a significant bout of the jitters ...  
... as in this first tale ...

Reaching WAY back in my memory, I come upon a story that took place when I was a “littler” fella.

As most of you know by now, I lived on a hill in my hometown of Schenectady, NY. At the top of the hill was my family’s church, the 2nd Reformed Church of Rotterdam (Rotterdam was the suburb we lived in) also known as Cobblestone Church. The sobriquet of the church was on account of the building’s facade being covered with ... say it together, boys and girls ... COBBLESTONES! (Yes, that’s correct!)

Anyway, just a little way down the hill was a separate fellowship hall where we had our church dinners and Sunday School classes.

(As an aside here, in the mid-Sixties, early one Monday morning, the furnace of the fellowship hall blew up. If it had gone up just 18 hours sooner, it would have taken most of the church’s congregation with it, including yours truly.)

One summer’s day, probably around 1961 or 1962, I was attending summer Bible school. I loved summer Bible school because we mostly drew pictures and sang songs. We weren’t stuffed into a classroom like we were in regular Sunday school. My fidgety bottom had trouble sitting still for too long.

ANYWAY ... we were outside near the front door, singing some jolly Christian song that Mrs. Logan was leading us through.

I loved singing along with Mrs. Logan. She was a sweet, funny farm lady who was wider than she was tall. I loved watching her girth bounce to the rhythm of the music as she waved her arms in tempo.

So, there we were, all singing, when we suddenly heard a horrible scream. Out from the little field that bordered the side of the fellowship hall ran Hayward Mason. Apparently, Hayward (who was my age) had slipped away from Mrs. Logan's bouncing belly to inspect a huge ant hill in that field. Hayward, being the trouble making kid that he was, decided it was a good idea to jump on the ant hill to smash it to bits.

In upstate New York, like most places, we have ants that are quite benign. However, we also have a rare type that falls in the category of army ant. This was the kind of ant breed Hayward encountered. When Hayward declared war on them, they retaliated.

I remember being equally fascinated and horrified at seeing the poor kid tearing out of the grass covered in huge ants. The adults tried their best to get the ants off him, but, every time they neared Hayward, they were chomped by the insects' formidable mandibles as well. Someone finally got a pail of water and doused Hayward, who was now writhing on the ground. The water seemed to help a bit. At least the grown-ups were able to get some of his clothes off him in order to remove most of the ants.

My last memory of that day is the ambulance guys wrapping Hayward up in a thick blanket usually used for burn victims and carting him off to the hospital.

Mercifully, Hayward survived the experience. He grew to adulthood, got married and shot his son ... but that's a story for another day.

Thinking back on the ant adventure, I'd say it was almost as much of a trauma for those of us watching as it was for Hayward going through it.

Well, maybe not ... but close.

Then there was the time, also in the early Sixties, I was running full speed down that same hill one warm spring morning after Sunday School. I almost tripped over a HUGE copperhead snake curled up directly in my path. (For those of you not in the know, a copperhead is a very poisonous snake. Occasionally, they would crawl up on the road to sun themselves.) At the last second, screaming like a girl, I frantically leapt over it. (Forgive me, please, if there are any screaming girls reading this). A few yards beyond, I turned around to see how close I had come to death. The snake barely raised its head, but looked at me as if to say, "Yer lucky, kid". I was lucky ... but my pulse didn't slow down until supper time.

Then there are the critters I never encountered until I moved to New York City in 1977.

For example, cockroaches.

At first, I didn't know what they were. I actually had to ask. However, after a few days, I learned ALL too well what they were. You see, the thing about roaches and New York City is they are inseparable. It doesn't matter where you live or how much money you make, or even how many times your apartment is sprayed, the cockroaches will always be the roommates that don't help with the rent. It got to the point where I became so inured to them, I could snatch one up in my hand and smash it. (OF COURSE I washed my hands afterwards ... sheesh!) You see, I had figured out, by the time I found something to kill the buggers with, they would be long gone. So, experience taught me to "Carpe la cucaracha": "Seize the cockroach".

That said, one or two little roaches at a time is bearable. However, when encountering what can be termed as "a living mass", it gets a little dicey.

In 1980, my good pal, Leslie and I moved to a one bedroom walk-up on Broadway and W. 80th Street on Manhattan's Upper West Side. It was an okay place, just old and run down. The kitchen was small, but had a high ceiling with cabinets that went almost to the top of the wall. You could only get to the uppermost shelves using a step stool. We usually "parked" anything we hardly ever used up there.

As the story goes, we had purchased a coffee maker for Leslie, but I decided to keep the box "just in case". (Future hoarders unite!)

After a short time, we began having a terrible roach problem. We cleaned and sprayed, even those upper shelves, but still the constant sightings continued. Then, one day, I needed to get something from our upper stash. As I was pulling whatever it was off the shelf, I noticed a few cockroaches running around that box. I took the box off the shelf and looked in.

Aaacchhheewieuckuck!!!

The insides were so carpeted with the bugs, I couldn't see the cardboard. The sight was a blob of pulsing cockroaches. Screaming like a girl (apologies), I quickly closed the box and in slo-mo, as not to disturb the insects' sanctity, I gently placed the box in the kitchen sink. Then I found a large trash bag and carefully put the box inside. But, by that time, the roaches had gotten "wise" to me and started streaming out all over my hands. Wildly, I tried to shake them off into the bag while reaching for the can of bug spray I always had at the ready. With the box inside the bag, I desperately closed the bag, leaving just enough of a hole to empty that can of bug spray into it. Slamming the bag shut and tying it three or four times, I ran out of the apartment as fast as I could and threw the bag and it's horrible contents into the garbage outside the building. I also wanted to get outside to try to shake off any bugs that might still be clinging to me.

Ewww!

Yes, those little roaches are gross, however, in Florida, they can be even more disquieting as they have de-evolved into dinosaurs. I am talking about palmetto bugs.

Boys and girls, these are cockroaches that grow to about four to five inches long and have incredibly hard armor. And the “best” part about them is they can FLY! Oy vey! The first time this little Northern boy encountered one, I absolutely freaked.

I was working at a dinner theatre in Tampa and sharing a trailer with a kid from the South. One afternoon, this “flying tank” breezed in through the open front door and landed a few inches from me. I was stunned. I didn’t know what to make of the thing. But my roomie just casually informed me that it was a palmetto bug and, in order to kill it, you had to jump on it with all your weight. Otherwise, their armor would not crack. So, of course, he proceeded to do the deed. I will never forget the sound of that crunch. But even worse was the goop of innards left behind.

Oh jeez!

Now, back to New York City. Another “new” wild animal encounter for me involved ... rats. There were everywhere! Thankfully, they mostly stayed on the streets or in the sewers. But when I saw one, I was always taken aback because a rat can grow to the size of a large cat. Although, I wouldn’t ever sic a cat of mine (if I had one) on a city rat. Kitty would be pushing up daisies after that slugfest.

Once, on a lovely summer evening, I decided to walk home after work from my job working in a theatre’s phone room on Broadway. I was living in the Village at the time, which made it about a 40 block walk; about 45 minutes or so. At one point, I approached a work zone that had been cordoned off with orange cones and “police tape”. Skirting the area, I stayed on the sidewalk. Just as I began to pass an open manhole, a rat, about the size of a small horse, popped out as from a “Whack-a-Mole” game from Hell. Staying halfway in the hole, it bared its fangs and claws and hissed at me. (Yes, it actually hissed!) Scaring the bejeezus out of me, I jumped about fifteen feet in the air, screaming in that ever customary high pitched voice.

I didn’t stick around to see if we could work out our misunderstandings.

One of my former roommates, Susan, told the story of how, on a very windy day, she went out to lunch. Being that the deli and her work were not very far from each other, she only threw on her raincoat, but didn’t button it. As she was walking down the sidewalk, her coat blew up and brushed over a garbage can she was passing. Apparently, a rat in the can decided to take advantage of the sudden “city transport” and latched onto the inside of her coat. She suddenly realized something was amiss when she perceived an animal darting around inside her coat. Screaming (just as I would!) she tore off the coat and kicked it to the curb. Leaving the garment (and the rat) on the sidewalk, she didn’t go back to work that day. She said the feeling of that rat running between her body and the coat traumatized her forever.

But rats aren’t just enjoying the sights in New York City. Nooooo!

When I was living in Washington, DC, I worked for eight years in the 1990's in the box office of Ford's Theatre. The office was in the old Star Saloon where John Wilkes Booth had a last snort before he did the dirty deed. Most of the saloon had been converted into a good-sized office holding three large desks. Only a small corner room housed the actual ticket counter. The large office had a very high ceiling with a decorative ledge that went all the way around the room, hugging the ceiling. One day, I was sitting at one of the desks, when some movement caught my eye. A large rat was touring around on that ledge. Who KNOWS where the creature came from. The crux of the matter was ... THERE WAS A RAT THERE! After a lot of MANY girl-like screams and rushing around by the box office staff, someone had the presence of mind to call the Park Service.

You see, because Ford's Theatre and its environs are a National Monument, it falls under the jurisdiction of the Park Service. Their office was on site, with a head ranger in charge.

Very soon, the head ranger, one of his lackeys and a janitor all trundled in with brooms and a box. I suppose the brooms were to coerce the errant rodent into the box. After a WHOLE lot of commotion, false starts, walking on desks and frantic broom jabs, the rat finally jumped to the floor, which caused a second round of squealing and rushing around; more from us than the rat. After being cornered under one of the desks, the rat suddenly made a break for it and ran out from under the desk toward the head ranger ... who promptly stomped on it with his unusually large foot. I was only a couple of feet from the ranger, so I got a ring-side view. I'll tell you, THAT was probably one of THE most gross sights of my entire adult life. I'll just say, I'm glad I didn't have to clean it up.

Got the stomach for one more creature story?

Okay, then.

My darling Danny and I owned a cabin on a mountain top in West Virginia from 2002 to 2017.

Early on in our ownership, we arrived in the evening (as we usually did after one of my performances). I began to unpack when I stopped dead in my tracks. In the kitchen sink was my personal nightmare: THE LARGEST spider I had ever seen in my life. I don't mean a couple of inches big, I mean at least six inches from the tip of one leg to the other! The body was gray and about two inches in length. The rest was all legs. I could barely breathe. Gathering my courage, I wrapped my hand in a dish towel, quickly threw a paper towel over the monstrosity and smashed it with my hand. Without even looking, I grabbed a another wad of paper towels and crumpled them up over the beast. I gingerly balled everything up and just threw it outside. I didn't want to deal with it. Being we were in the middle of the forest, I figured nature would simply take its course.

I wish I could say it ended there. But almost every subsequent visit, there was another huge spider sitting in the kitchen sink to greet us. I finally figured there must have been a colony living in the septic tank. Because we were on the top of the mountain, all the effluents from our drains went into a septic tank. However, since the drains weren't being used enough to fill the tank for any extended period of time, the spiders were enjoying the benefits of condominium living down there. Coming up through the open drain, the metal sink was a cool respite from the summer heat.

UGH!

After a few of these encounters, I always made sure I poured Drano down all the sink and shower traps when we left. THEN I covered them with a plug of some kind, so nothin' could push its way out. I decided it was okay with me if they lurked somewhere down in the bowels of our pipes. I just didn't want to ever see them.

Okay. I'm done.

No matter what sort of living beasts I met up with, be it large or small, my life experience was broadened by the adventure. Yes, occasionally I was somewhat traumatized, but edified none-the-less. Just remember, as disquieting as all this story telling may have been, it was in celebration of nature's creatures. However, in some cases, I think the animals sometimes had a better time at the party than I did.

Still on the lookout,  
Mother Nature's Adopted Son

## TV 'n' me

Because I spent my formative years during the time span from the very late 1950's to the early 1970's, I lived through what is now called "The Golden Age of Television". I don't know who named it that, but from my experience, the phrase really hits the mark. Even as a kid-ling, I had the feeling that some of the stuff I was watching was pretty special.

Of course, those were the days of only three major television networks: NBC, CBS and ABC. There was a rarely watched "public television" station, but that hardly got a second glance. In Schenectady, NBC was Channel 6, CBS was Channel 10 and ABC was Channel 13. As far as I know, they still are. Only these days, the "neighborhood" is a lot more crowded. Back then, any channel above the number 13 was considered an oddity; sort of like the unwanted step child that was kept in the attic and was fed through a small opening in a door.

Early on, we watched television the same way most families we knew did their viewing. Almost everyone had a 13" to 19" black and white TV screen with the signal being brought into the home with a rabbit ear antenna. Occasionally these "rabbit ears" had aluminum foil wrapped around the extending rods. I know the foil "thing" has become a cliché these days, but it actually did help.

Although, what REALLY helped was a genuine antenna that was usually bolted to one's roof or the eave to one's house. Attached to the antenna was a flat wire that clung to the outside of your house, like some artificial ivy and was fed into the opening of a window near your television. That way the wire could be readily attached to the back of the TV. Now, it took a while for the Cupo household to get a rooftop antenna. Usually only the "wealthier" households had one. I think the breaking point came when one of us kids (yours truly) got overly cranky from having to stand through part of a baseball game, holding onto the rabbit ears, because that was the only way the family could get a good enough signal to see the ballplayers. Adding insult to injury, I didn't even like baseball!

That said, I remember the day my poor father climbed onto the peaked roof of our old farmhouse to install our newly purchased rooftop antenna. Precariously balancing himself on the death-defyingly steep incline, he turned the various spokes that stuck out from the antenna's supporting pole this way and that. My brother John and I took turns standing by the open living room window, gazing at the television screen as dad yelled down to us: "How's the picture?" "How 'bout now?" "How 'bout NOW?" After what seemed like hours getting a satisfactory result, we would then change channels and begin the process all over again with dad yelling out more inquiries of "How's the

picture?" Even though it took half our lives to get the task done, I had to admit, the eventual outcome WAS a better image. Plus I was ecstatic I no longer had to suffer the excruciating tedium of being a human receiver.

The first time I saw a real color television was when dad and I traveled across town to make a brief visit to his cousin Nicky's house. Nicky had some money socked away from being an owner of a successful liquor store. Being that Nicky always had the best of everything, he had a rooftop antenna very early on. However, it was the RCA color television that truly was the envy of his impoverished cousins. I remember it was "HUGE"; with at least a 24" screen. The television shared a laminated wood console cabinet with a hifi stereo turn table. "Wow!" It had a remote control which was also the first one I had ever seen. Although, I didn't really think too much of the remote. In those days, even though it was called a remote control, it was attached to the television by a long wire that led to wherever you were leisurely lounging. I thought there was too much of a danger of tripping over the wire. Plus the wire on the floor looked messy. And as far as seeing color on the screen, I was equally unimpressed. Little did I know, when I was there, the family had been watching a show that was not yet broadcasting in color. So all I saw was a black and white image tinted with a vague brownish green. "That's color TV???" I was thoroughly apathetic.

I didn't realize my folly until I saw a color television broadcasting a show IN COLOR in a local department store.

Silly me.

The very first show I watched in color was "Lost in Space". The first season was broadcast in black and white. But the "hook" the network used to get you to watch the second season was that it would be shown in color.

It's funny how these days we take color broadcasting so nonchalantly. OF COURSE all the programming is in color. Nowadays, It's an anomaly when some show does a "fun retro" airing in black and white. But, back then, in the mid-Sixties, color television was a selling point. NBC even changed its lettered logo to a colorful "peacock" in order to announce a show that was going to be broadcast "in living color".

Ooooooooooooo!

My long suffering mother's father was always ardent in his desire to keep up to date. My mother told the story that, even though they had little extra spending money in the late 1940's, my grandfather managed to scrape up the funds on his carpenter's salary to buy a very early black and white television. Anyway, staying true to his nature, he was one of the first people in my neighborhood to buy a color television.

So ... one Wednesday evening in 1966, my grandfather agreed to let us invade his living room in order to watch the first episode of the second season of "Lost in Space" ... in color. To me, the difference was stunning. I will never forget how saturated the colors

were. I could even detect the lip gloss Dr. Smith was wearing. Being that Dr. Smith was a man, it was even more surprising. It all seemed like a miracle to me. And in spite of my grandfather's grumblings of his not believing what garbage we watched, I thought it was one of the greatest things I had ever seen in my life.

Both sets of grandparents had their favorite shows. My mother's parents tended to like baseball and football games. My father's mother had a crush on the band leader, Lawrence Welk and religiously enjoyed his "An' a-one-a, an' a-two-a ...". But on Saturday nights, everyone was tuned to "The Jackie Gleason Show" ("How sweet it is!") My family watched "Jackie Gleason" as well. We never missed it.

However, in our house, I somehow became the keeper of the TV watching schedule. I'm not sure how that happened; maybe out of my parents' not wanting to hear me whining ... or maybe they thought I was such a loser they wanted to give me some sense of power. Either way, it became tradition that at the beginning of each September, when "TV Guide" put out its special double issue of the Fall television schedule, I would go through and circle the shows we would watch in the evenings. (It's amazing they managed to fit an entire television schedule in its little paperback-sized format). I did take a brief survey of each family member's preferences, but, ultimately, for many a year at least, I chose our viewing lineup.

As a result, we ended up seeing some shows that were complete bombs and lasted one or two seasons, but still stand out in my brain.

One was called "Grindl" starring Imogene Coca. It lasted for one season in 1963. She played a woman who was hired out for various temporary jobs by a temp agency. She made me laugh. But, being that it aired at the same time as "The Ed Sullivan Show", it was doomed from the start.

Another favorite show that failed was "Glynis" starring Glynis Johns as a mystery writer that solved mysteries. It also was in the 1963 season, but didn't even make it into the New Year, being canceled in December.

Still another show from the very early Sixties I loved that apparently wasn't a favorite of the general population was "Car 54, Where Are You?". It starred Joe E. Ross and Fred Gwynne as two hapless New York City cops. Unfortunately, it also was done in by "The Ed Sullivan Show".

Well, that's show biz.

SPEAKING of "The Ed Sullivan Show", I remember no one in my family wanted to watch The Beatles when they made their second appearance on Ed's variety hour in 1964. We had a little red and cream hued portable television that one of my dad's hairdressing customers gave to him. We put it in the basement. In spite of the set's age and size, it got pretty good reception. So, that Sunday night, I went down into our dank basement to watch The Beatles. But I couldn't just sit and watch them ... oh no. I put on

a pair of roller skates that I tightened with a key in order to attach them to the bottom of my shoes. I then roller skated all around the cement floor as I listened and sang to “She Loves You”.

I was creative even then.

Often, I made personal sacrifices in order to watch a show. There were many a warm evening, I would give up my outdoor playtime to frantically run home just in time to watch “The Flintstones” or “The Monkees”.

That said ... in those years, I did get to see some brilliant television. One such standout was “The Tonight Show with Jack Paar”. He preceded Johnny Carson as host of “The Tonight Show” and set the standard for late night television. I didn’t get to watch it every night, of course. My mother was a stickler for an 8:30 “reasonable” bedtime for us kids. Buuut, on Friday nights, she allowed me to stay up past my usual sleepy time. Once everyone else had gone to bed, I got to watch Jack Paar and his amazing array of guests and regulars. I saw interviews with Judy Garland and Tallulah Bankhead; Cyril Richard and Bette Davis. There were comedy “sketches” with Charlie Weaver and also the brilliant Jonathan Winters. Even as a little tyke, I knew it was exceptional television. Sitting in the dark, curled up on the couch in my pajamas, I felt sophisticated.

I have to say, our TV set became an important part of my growing years. I laughed at Red Skelton and Carol Burnett and watched the CBS News with “Uncle” Walter Cronkite. I cried with the rest of the country at the funeral of President Kennedy and was in complete awe when “we” landed on the moon. To me, early television never seemed trivial. The programming had the gravitas of a school room. I learned and laughed and grew to love the people and images that appeared every day in my parents’ living room.

Those three channels really helped to shape who I am today. And I am truly grateful.

These days, however, I just wish my inner antenna got better reception.

In living color,  
Mr. Television

## Riding the waves

Now that I have confessed my not-so secret relationship with old-time television, I decided I needed to give due diligence to its older cousin, the radio.

These days, I only listen sporadically to what comes over the radio waves. Generally, I wake myself up in the AM tuned into NPR's Morning Edition while I shave and clip stray nose hairs. And, occasionally, I keep some "noise" going on the car radio when I am driving solo around the 'hood. My darling Danny and I don't listen to the radio when we are in the car together because we have SUCH engaging conversations.

However, in the good ol' days of my long ago youth, I listened to the radio religiously. If I was near a radio, it was usually turned on.

I don't know if the reason was from the need for noise in order to drown out any extraneous distractions to help my hyperactive self focus. Or because I felt some innate connection to the significant history my hometown of Schenectady had on the development of commercial radio.

You see, signing on for business in 1915, the station WGY was one of the very first stations to radiocast in the United States. Its broadcast tower happened to be very near my house. As a kid, I always thought that fact was kind-a cool. As a result, I mostly listened to WGY, which, in the 1960's, was playing the popular music of the day. Also, I listened because of having the strongest signal from the close proximity of the tower.

(Sadly, these days, WGY is all news/talk radio ... sigh).

In the past, I've written of my poor father's father having a 15 minute program of mandolin music in the early 1920's on WGY. So I suppose, listening to it as much as I did, I must have had a feeling of some sort of family loyalty or duty.

Or maybe I just liked the music.

My clock radio alarm woke me for school every weekday to the dulcet tones of "House of the Rising Sun" or "Sugar, Sugar". To this day, after all those years of waking to the sudden blast of music, I'm not able to sleep if there is a radio or television turned on.

During the day, with the school bus radio blaring, the wonderful driver assigned to our bus route, delivered us to school in the morning and to our homes in the afternoon. On warm days, I remember recklessly standing next to an open window on the bus, the wind blowing in my face, reveling in the latest hits. I'm SURE all of this was against school policy. It was a miracle none of us were killed from some sudden screeching halt of the bus. But the driver seemed to really enjoy seeing the kids relax. Or maybe he was secretly a sadist and was hoping we would injure ourselves. In either case,

I don't know how many people can say they have pleasant memories of their bus rides to school, but I do.

And then, most every night, I lay in bed, before falling asleep, loving the sounds of the greatest hits. Of course, I was not supposed to be doing that very thing. But being the little rebel that I was, after the lights were turned off, I took my transistor radio and buried my head under the covers. Then I turned the sound down as low as it would go. I'd lay on my side and place the radio on my exposed ear, so I could listen to the music unencumbered by having to hold on to it. I recall, it was then I first heard of something called "Woodstock", which was going to occur about an hour and a half's drive south of us. I knew I was too young to go, but was intrigued of, what was being called, "The Happening". I also remember being confused and enthralled when, among all the pop and rock music being aired, Tony Bennett's "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" was the number one hit. I loved that!

It could be said that, on some level, the intimacy I felt from my radio time was strictly personal. Sure I discussed the latest music with my friends. However, for the most part, our references came from the 45s or LPs we played and not from what was heard over the air. The moments I spent with my radio came to feel special; almost exclusive to me alone.

All that said, July of 1969 inhabits one of the most vivid memories I have. That summer was extraordinarily hot. Even going outside held no relief. So, with the window fans whirring away, I would sit on the floor of my bedroom, playing with a construction kit called Skyscraper. As I sat there sweating, building my buildings, I savored the sounds of "In the Year 2525" and "Honky Tonk Woman". It was wonderful. Adding to my personal magical time was hearing the latest news of the day with the astronauts of Apollo 11 taking off on July 16th on their way to be the first people on the moon.

Up to this point in time, even as a kid, I knew society was in turmoil with protests and riots. The decade had seen three beloved leaders assassinated. The war in Viet Nam was still raging. The summer of '69 became a watershed year for the rest of the country as everyone anticipated the coming of the new decade. But, for me, in isolation in my hot little room, listening to my beloved radio, time stood still. And for just a short while, the sounds I heard coming from the speaker made me feel all was right with the world.

Still listening (for better news),  
Little "Radiohead"

## Fresh fruit

Fresh fruit.

No really ... I'm talking about REAL fruit here. (What did you THINK this was going to be all about?)

I know most of you will be doubtful when I tell you, but we have an ABUNDANCE of citrus trees growing right here in our little Tucson and it's environs. Everywhere, people have a variety of fruiting trees growing in their back yards. It's like Florida, only without the humidity. Of course, in the middle of the desert, we still need to irrigate with that good ol' Colorado River snow melt. Citrus trees don't live on air alone, ya know.

As a matter of fact, the folks who owned our house before they departed for that great grove in the sky, planted two orange trees and a lemon tree in the back yard. And, oh my holy good gracious me, do those things bear fruit! Come the first of February, we have an embarrassment of citrus riches on our hands. Yes, it is wonderful being able to walk out in the morning and grab a handful or two (... or three or ten ...) of fresh, delicious oranges or lemons for one's personal enjoyment. But when there are fifty thousand more orbs still dangling on the branches in one's face, one begins to feel a little guilty for leaving the rest of them there!

At this time of year, everybody ends up with the same dilemma. I will often see random bags of grapefruit or lemons by the side of the road with a sign against them saying, "Help yourself". Of course that is very generous of the mysterious giver, however EVERYONE down here is in the same boat! Who is going to want your orphan citrus when there is a boatload growing in your own back yard?

I do have to say, the lemons in our yard ARE pretty special. They are huge and juicy (frankly, better than store bought) and almost kind-a sweet ... ish ... as far as lemons go.

However, something I didn't know until I began picking our generous crop: lemon trees are REALLY thorny! The branches have huge spikes growing out of them! It's almost as if they are daring you to take their yellow offspring. I've grown to think lemon trees are nature's sadists. I truly have been impaled on a number of occasions. One can almost hear them chuckling at their dastardly deed.

Who knew?

I have also come to learn that orange trees have the same inbred weaponry, but aren't as ardent about causing you serious damage. Even so, you really need to be careful when plucking the things.

However, in spite of the fear of bleeding out, I am delighted to have this largess of citrus so close at hand. Ever since I have been having a lot of STUPID kidney stone episodes, I have been putting lemon juice in my water. I have even gotten so used to having a little tartness on my lips, whenever I take a sip of basic water, filtered or not, it just tastes plain ... well ... plain!

My darling Danny bought us a heavy duty juice squeezer last year. It is bronzed and handsome. It looks like something you would see in a high end pub with a mustachioed bartender at the lever, "pulling a draft" for a wealthy customer. It's perfect for making lots of juice from our harvest.

My sister-in-law, Dee, recently gave us a good idea. She said we should juice the extra fruit and freeze the liquid in ice cube trays. She said to, then, pop the frozen cubes out and store them in plastic bags. So whenever a little extra lemon or orange juice is needed, just pull a few cubes from the bag and voila! The goodies will last forEVER!

She is so clever.

Before I move on, I MUST add ... with all this talk of juicin', be assured we don't just stick "raw" product in our yaps. There are a lot of birdies that live in them thar trees. And what do birdies produce? Bird poop, of course! So, we always thoroughly wash anything we collect in good ol' soapy water afore slicing or peeling. Then, thanks to my darling Danny's expertise in food safety, we pour any juice collected into a pot and bring it to just barely the boiling point. That way, we have our very own pasteurization factory going on in our kitchen.

After all, cleanliness is next to Godliness ... and safety is next to not dying from a food borne illness.

But back to the trees ...

They DO bear a lot of fruit... A LOT!

Although, last year, before the fruiting, I asked the nice guy who looks after our yard (for a VERY reasonable rate, thank you) to trim back the lemon tree. You see, besides being prolific bearers of fruit, lemon trees are profuse growers. It is almost as if they are reaching out to try to wreak damage on any living thing drawing too near to them; as I said, sadists. Anyway, my yard guy trimmed the thing so far back, we barely had ANYthing to harvest that year.

The lesson we learned is that if you discipline a lemon tree, they sulk. They will pout and withdraw for a year or so until you can't stand the petulance. You end up begging for forgiveness and promise to reward their bad behavior with luscious fertilizers and gallons of water.

Lemon trees always get their way.

That year of sparsity, Danny and I knew something was "up" because the season before had seen an over-bountiful harvest of lemons. That was the time we were simply

overwhelmed with produce! We didn't know what to do with all the fruit! Thank goodness we found out about a plant nursery that was acting as a central collection spot for citrus. We could bring them any unwanted fruit and they would distribute the bounty to food banks and homeless shelters around the city. We packed SIX large paper grocery bags full and brought them down. Of course, we weren't the only ones there with the same intentions. There were cars constantly coming and going, unloading bags and bushels and crates of fruit. Thank goodness there were many volunteers on site to help. The organization in charge had three large trucks in the parking lot, each intended for different varieties of fruit: lemons, oranges and grapefruits. To see all that fruit was, simultaneously, fantastic and astounding.

This year, I think I will try a blend of tactics. Just recently, I squished a pitcherful of lemon juice to put in my water. A pitcher of fresh orange juice will be next. Then I will move onto a few ice cube trays. And then more ... and then A LOT more! Next will be the pestering of our neighbors into taking their fill. And will quickly follow that by scouring the local newspaper for another citrus drop off orgy.

Arrrgh! It's a lot of work for so much pleasure!

Oh, well. I'll live with it.

Hey! Anybody want some oranges?

On a trip to bountiful,  
Juicy Fruit

## More fruitful thoughts

So, speaking of fruit ...

I grew up in an area that was abundant in the stuff.

As you all most likely know by now, I grew up in the Mohawk River valley in a suburb of Schenectady, NY called Rotterdam. Just down the hill from my house was a flood plain with plenty of fertile soil. However the hills themselves were rife with rich loam ideal for growing.

The settlers who lived in the area long before I was around were mostly farmers. However some of those hearty folk had a predilection for creating orchards. As a result, in the twentieth century, when the old farmlands were built up with homes, the developers left much of the old fruit trees intact. Thus, everyone in my 'hood had at least one apple, pear or cherry tree in their yard.

We kids LOVED taking advantage of the produce. Not only was the yield convenient for an afternoon snack, the local crop was great motivation for causing screams of "WAR!"; resulting in bombardments of fruit breaking out between factions of bored adolescents.

Growing in our side yard, we had a particularly hard kind of pear that was especially brutal to any unprotected body part. We called it a "winter pear". I don't know if that was the actual name, but the tree bore its fruit just as the cold months were beginning. Looking like a smallish, green apple, it was hard as a rock; perfect for use as ammunition. But if you were hungry and managed to gnaw any flesh off the core, you were rewarded with a surprisingly sweet, rich burst of flavor. However, you had to really work hard for the stuff.

The neighborhood was also covered with a plethora of an assortment of berries: mostly raspberries and blackberries. And they grew everywhere. When walking down my road and I happened to be passing a copse of trees, there were almost always a branch or two of berries sticking out ready to tempt me with their treasure.

My favorite place to snag some raspberries was along the side fence of the parking lot of the schoolyard near my house. The berries there were huge and sweet. Though I had to be careful when choosing what I put in my mouth. The birds liked the berries as well. Only our avian friends didn't discriminate where they relieved themselves. More than once, I had to spit out a "poop berry".

Yum!

But my very favorite spot to garner berries was the blackberry patch on the property of our good friends, the Wintergersts. The family lived on a very steep part of the hill on which our houses were situated. Much of their property had been cleared and

was just grass. However, along the far end of the hill, the trees had been left to flourish. Just at the bottom of their property, where the trees were at their most dense, was a veritable smorgasbord of blackberry bushes. You had to claw and climb your way through the brambles and the brush in order to get to them. But when you did, you were rewarded with a fairy palace of blackberry briars all around you. The density of the branches created ceilings and walls of deliciousness. You had to be careful, however, because of the thorns. Blackberry bushes are laden not only with fruit, but with pricklers. More than once, in my effort to get to a juicy looking berry, I was impaled on the brambles guarding it.

However, whenever we went into that inner sanctum, there were always uninvited guests already living there: mosquitoes; SWARMS of them! I found it impossible to go blackberry picking without being armored with long sleeves and long pants along with being doused in bug spray. Though it wasn't that the mosquitoes were partaking of the berries. The tormentors liked the cool, shaded environs against the summer heat and humidity. There were times I could have stayed a lot longer, enjoying the fruits of my labors, if it weren't for getting eaten alive by the mosquitoes. I guess you could say the insects were getting their fill of treats as much as I was.

Regretfully, the only time I remember the wonderful Wintergersts and my family getting into a fight was over a misunderstanding regarding those blackberries.

One day, in the early Sixties, when I was about ten, Mrs. Wintergerst called me on the telephone. I thought that was unusual because, if she called, it was because she wanted to speak to either my poor father or my long suffering mother. But on that day, she telephoned in order to speak to me. She said that her mother, who we all called Oma, was going to go pick blackberries for making some preserves. ("Oma" is the German word for grandmother). Oma needed a lot of berries, so Mrs. W. asked if I would come over to help. To my recollection, she implied I would be rewarded for my assistance, which I understood to mean she would pay me. I readily said that I would. So off I went, long sleeved shirted and covered in bug spray.

I remember a couple of my Wintergerst kid-pals were already in the bushes when I arrived. So, grabbing a bowl that was on the ground, I went to work. Between Oma, me and the kids, we gathered a good amount. Happily trudging up the hill to the house, our bowls brimming, we were delighted with our good bounty. However, when we went into the house and I asked Mrs. Wintergerst for my reward, she looked surprised. Still smiling, I clarified by saying I was hoping for my pay. She laughed and said there was no pay; she had asked me as a favor to her. I was confused because that was not what I had understood the conversation to entail. But, being the good little kid, I shrugged and said my good-byes and slumped home.

I was a little sad when I got into my house. Then I made the BIG mistake of telling my mother what had happened.

If any of you remember, previously from my brief biography of my mother, I wrote of her hair-trigger temper. Well, apparently my little tale made her head explode. I swear I saw her eyes turn red. I knew this wasn't going to be pretty.

She was immediately on the phone to Mrs. Wintergerst and "came at her with both barrels blasting". I'm sure Mrs. W. didn't know what hit her. Very quickly, they were yelling at each other. With every passing minute, I cowered farther and farther away from the telephone nook in our kitchen. Of course, the conversation ended with a slamming down of the phone onto its cradle.

But it wasn't over. When Mr. Wintergerst got home from work, he became involved. That wasn't going to help. You see, Mr. Wintergerst had a temper almost as fast and intense as my mother's. So, with the ringing of our telephone, the battle escalated.

I was feeling SO guilty! I felt I started it all. But my feelings of humiliation and disgrace only got worse when I got called to the phone. Mr. Wintergerst wanted to speak to me.

("Ohhh noooo!")

I could tell he was trying to calm himself when I got on the line. He wanted to know what I thought I had been told. After repeating my story, he told me I must have heard wrong and that I should apologize to Mrs. Wintergerst.

By this time, my father had gotten home and both my parents were hovering around me as I went through my story with Mr. W.

Still holding onto the telephone receiver in my hands, I told my parents that Mr. Wintergerst wanted me to apologize. Hearing that, my mother started to go ballistic again.

I have to give my father credit here. He ended up being the arbitrator with the whole mess. He asked me for the phone and then had a "nice talk with Walter" (Mr. Wintergerst's first name). My dad got everyone to agree it had been a terrible misunderstanding. He also got my mother to agree to allow me to apologize to Mrs. Wintergerst. He soothed everyone's ruffled feathers as only my father could. He then handed the receiver over to me in order for me to give my apology. After I finished and was properly mortified ... and dad said his good-byes to both Wintergersts, he hung up and immediately changed the subject. He offered to take everybody out for ice cream.

This was so much like my father. He always had a talent for changing the topic of any uncomfortable conversation. I call him "The Great Deflector". But, on that day,

thanks to him, I was very grateful to be able to “run away” from the whole ugly situation.

The story did have a happy ending. After a few days of everyone licking their wounds, everything went back to normal with Wintergersts. My family was welcome in their home and that old comfortable feeling came back. Although my mother seemed to never really get over the incident, a sense of normalcy returned.

However, it is odd to think that, in the moment, Mrs. Wintergerst couldn't have found it in her heart to give me a small coin of some sort. I would have been delighted with a quarter or even a nickle, for goodness sake. And why did I, the innocent, have to apologize? I hadn't done any yelling.

Oma eventually did pass on a completed jar of blackberry preserve. It was delicious. But, you know? I never did find out what was the “reward” Mrs. Wintergerst was talking about.

Oh well ... as they say ... water under the bridge.

Anyway, looking back, for most of the time, the fruits of my neighborhood were a source of delight. It was only occasionally when the cries of “War!” were invoked; whether the battles were real or imagined. Whatever the situation, we all felt a stirring of some sort when it came to our local crop.

Who knew that produce could induce such intense emotions? Maybe that's how passion fruit got its name.

Fervent for fruit,  
Mother Nature's son

## It all makes sense

With all the CRRRRRRAZY times we are all experiencing these days, I began to ruminate on things that make me happy. As a matter of fact, I was going to title this chapter “These are a few of my favorite things”, but then I got to thinking, I didn’t want to appear to be stealing the lyrics to a Rodgers and Hammerstein classic song and claim the phraseology as my own.

Certainly, there are many a thing in my life that bring me joy. My marriage for one. The life I lead here in Tucson for another. However, I am referring to the “smaller” things in my daily space that plant a smile on my face and a spring in my step. Now THAT said, some of the stuff I am about to reveal isn’t so pleasant nor “my favorite”; like the results from an illness that changed my ways.

For example, the aftereffects of a brain tumor on my hearing. Before the brain surgery I endured in 1998, I LOVED to listen to music. It was something I did constantly. I enjoyed vocals from The Beatles, show music and American standards from singers like Tony Bennett and Keely Smith. However, after surgery and completely losing the hearing in my right ear, the part of me that really relished listening to music as a pastime changed. Part of the reason was, after the “slicing and dicing”, I could only hear in monotone. No more stereophonic sound for me. Also, maybe when the docs were in my head, they tinkered with more than just the hearing nerve and tweaked my “this brings you pleasure” lobe. Whatever the reason, now my most enjoyable audio stimulation comes from nature, such as birds singing or the sound the wind makes against the house on a blustery day. If I do listen to music, it tends to be Blue Grass. How can one be unaffected when listening to Blue Grass? Even when they sing of “my love got murdered and is buried in a cold, cold grave”, it sounds happy and peppy. You can’t be depressed when music is presented that way!

Although, I have to admit, music does conjure a feeling of nostalgia. There are songs I will hear that take me back and make me smile. “I Left my Heart in San Francisco” will always make me feel good.

Now, I know most of you must have experienced a flash of nostalgia of some kind when you hear a certain song. Just like when you are brought back to a time and place in your life when you smell a certain something cooking. The aroma will conjure a really strong memory.

Some of my favorite smells are based in my childhood. These days, the smell from the cooking of my darling Danny’s chili reminds me of my paternal grandmother’s spaghetti sauce simmering all day on her stove. That aroma brings me bliss. And the taste of both Danny’s chili and the memory of savoring my grandmother’s cooking are

special to me. They usher me to my happy place. Just as the smell of pine makes me flash back to the times when we would go out into the pine forests near our house in Schenectady and cut a fresh Christmas tree. The recollection brings up all the excitement surrounding the upcoming holiday.

I felt sorry for my long suffering mother. She had a condition in which she could not smell anything; pleasant or otherwise. Apparently, she could still taste food, but if a skunk walked under her feet, she would not be able to detect it. (Now that I think of it, maybe that wouldn't have been so bad.) I have two nephews and a niece who inherited the same condition. (There's something to be said for genetics!)

Smells are so significant to me, I can't imagine living life unable to detect the slightest aroma. The memory of the smell of wood burning in Danny's and my little Franklin stove in our former cabin in West Virginia or the way everything smells after a Spring rain are truly important to me.

I sense these things so strongly, I see the whole image in my mind's eye. My memory works like a camera. Pictures flash through my head like an old movie. People ask me how I remember all these stories I've been telling. For me, is like leafing through a picture book. I just "turn the pages" and see memories laid out in front of me.

And I am still creating new images. I love seeing the Santa Catalina Mountains outside my front door. Getting to see all the wildlife in my back yard brings me continual joy. Endless blue sky dotted with monsoon rain clouds cascading out their nourishing flood excite me. On the other hand, there isn't a need for happenings on a grand scale in order for me to feel bliss. Doing a crossword puzzle (or two) in the morning causes me complete contentment.

It's those kind of good feelings that get me through my day.

I am a sensitive fellow, both emotionally and physically. What I feel in my innards convey to my "outards" ... and vice versa. What I mean is ... If I am unhappy, I feel truly ill. If I feel pain, I get sad. For me, the emotional and the physical co-exist. My skin seems to be extra-sensitive. My bed sheets need to be perfectly flat, otherwise, I can't sleep. And if I don't get enough sleep, I feel nauseous. Just call me "The Princess and the Pea".

But, when everything comes together such as when I hear the birds chirping and smell Danny's morning toast, I smile. When I eat a turkey dinner or see holiday decorations, I find delight. Sensing and feeling all these personal pleasures remind me that everything is a gift from God. And, whether we realize it or not, each of us is the incredibly lucky recipient of that generosity.

THAT makes me even happier.

Gratefully, A fellow beneficiary