

MUSINGS FROM AN ADDLED MIND

By Steven Cupo
Summer 2020

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my darling Danny, who has supported and greatly assisted me even though I got cranky-er.

You, also, should be made aware of another way he has helped me.

Because Danny's specialty is in food safety, he encouraged me to occasionally lick a doorknob. You see, that way, the microbes I may pick up from the surface would populate my gut and cause me to be less vulnerable to disease.

However, I'm abstaining ... I'd rather be vulnerable.

Introduction

On June 5, 2020, a bolt of lightning struck the west flank of the Santa Catalina Mountains, just north of Tucson, Arizona, causing a month-long conflagration that destroyed 120,000 acres of wilderness.

How's THAT for a knee-slappin' opening line for a light-hearted book?

Hilarious, right?

(I will pause while the laughing dies down and you take a moment to gather yourselves.)

...

Actually, that IS how this whole writing thing started. It wasn't originally intended as a vehicle for sharing some light banter and self-humiliation.

Noo ...

After the lightning hit and the burning began, friends and relatives across the country started frrrreaking out because they knew, just three years earlier, my spouse of thirty years, Danny Engeljohn, I and my poor father had MOVED from Washington, DC to Tucson. They realized we were in the thick of things. I didn't want any chest beating or rending of clothes by my familiars, so I began a blog-thing on AOL in order to keep them informed of the fire's progress. My darling Danny suggested I start posting it on Facebook as well, so as to assuage the worries of other interested parties.

("THEIR worries?!? What about MY worries???"

Once the fire passed and Danny and I could unpack our car (yes, it had come to that) which had been filled with our most precious possessions, (one never knows WHAT one considers precious until one has a bonfire cauterizing one's front door) that I felt comfy enough to begin slipping in a bon mot or two amidst said blog-thing. Well, the less I wrote about the fire and the more I added in my somewhat, over-the-top commentaries, the more folks read my little compositions. By the time the fire had gone the way of the dinosaur, my blog-thing had become a real live journal!

(Although, out of reverence for its initial purpose, I still refer to it as a blog-thing.)

However, with the blaze over, I was feeling there was really nothing else to write about. When I attempted to end it and slip away into the sunset of my WELL-deserved twilight years, a cry of anguish went up from those trapped in their homes from the Plague. (You vaguely remember COVID-19, don't you?)

Apparently, folks were being entertained by my foibles and follies. (They liked me, they really liked me!) So, it was then these kind people in the dark convinced me I could not possibly stop myself from sharing my wisdom, depth of thought and mental illness. Thus, continuing, "Steven Cupo! This is Your Life!"

(Old people will get that reference.)

Over the weeks, I tried my best to hinder readers from drifting off by engaging them with the tippy-toppest of tales I could conjure. And the MOST unbelievable thing about it (well, the SECOND most unbelievable thing ... the first being my short attention span didn't kick in and cause me to wander away from the whole she-bang) was that every word was true. Yes, these outlandish stories of my life as an adequate actor, singer, waiter, son, friend and all-round misfit all unfolded exactly as I relived them ... or, at least, in my mind, they did.

So, if you dare to turn the page, you will find yourself at the end of June 2020, after the real danger had elapsed. We begin in the midst of my last fire reports, overlapping with the beginnings of my Steven reports. IF you DECIDE to continue reading these higglety-pigglety musings, I am hoping you will have a modicum of patience, a true sense of forgiveness and the knowledge of how truly grateful I am that you find it, in part, mildly entertaining.

And besides, what other burning desire (get it?) could you possibly have?

This has been a public service announcement.

With heartfelt thanks,
Ranger Steve

ps – You have been warned.

Sunday's Fire Log

There is an old saying, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." I don't know about the validity of that adage, but, in the case of today's fire news, it seems to apply.

Gratefully, our end of the fire is basically out. However the southeast end has suddenly had a huge burst of activity. The fire has now burned 88,000 acres of land and is remaining steady at 33% containment. It has now surpassed a record fire from 2003. Unfortunately, that fire destroyed 300 homes and businesses. The current Bighorn Fire has stayed confined to wilderness ... maybe ...

Giveth:

The back burns the fire fighters set in our area really worked well. There is hardly a trace of flame; just a few wisps of smoke we can see on the ridge near us. We have even unpacked our car. The village of Summerhaven and the space observatories remain in a little island of green at the top of the mountain.

Taketh away:

The fire on the southeast end swept down the mountainside yesterday afternoon, pushed by the same winds that were an advantage to us in the northwest. It hit a large open area of buffelgrass, an invasive species that burns hot and fast. As a result, an extended area of homes were evacuated last night. Still, the authorities think, because it is on a more level terrain, they will be able to battle it more easily.

As an aside, I was thinking to myself, we human beans certainly have a long history of finding other people's misery entertaining. And, sometime, in the case of actual injury, hilarious! Isn't that just plain WEIRD?

Why do we find pain funny?

Not our own, of course ... at least, not when we are in the middle of our own personal excruciating agony. (Although, the phrase "excruciating agony" is so ridiculous, it breeds it's own aura of humor ... but I digress ...)

Although, sometimes, WAY after the onset of our own unpleasant experience, we may chuckle in disbelief on how much suffering we went through.

("I can't believe I lost all my fingers in that lawn mower accident, heh heh heh.")

No, I am talking about other people's pain.

Watching OTHER folks slip on a banana peel, smash their nose into a door jamb or get suddenly nailed by a falling something-or-other will always bring us a rise of glee.

Why?

The long-lived art form of slapstick was based solely on the concept of “pain equals hilarity”. From decades of The Three Stooges poking their fingers in one another’s eyes and just generally beating each other up (“Nyuk, Nyuk, Nyuk”) to thirty seasons of crotch slams on “America’s Funniest Home Videos”, people have been making piles of money from other folks’ misery.

Is it because it falls under the category of “Poor schmuck. Better he than me.” I suppose it’s a way to make ourselves feel better by our sub-conscious saying, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

And, admit it ... we are ALL guilty!

What is wrong with us?

This recently got all stirred up in my brain when a friend sent me pictures of his newly passed kidney stones. He and his wife were driving thirteen hours to see his ailing mother. They didn’t want to fly because of the specter of COVID looming over them. The extreme pain of the stones hit while they were on the long road trip. Well, as he wrote to me, “Aren’t you lucky to have a friend who sends you pics of abnormal objects cooked up in his guts and pissed out at an Airbnb in Amarillo?”

I mean ... c’mon! That is pure comedy!!

However, I need to remind you, kidney stones are one of the most painful experiences one can have in their life! Believe me ... after personally having six or ten episodes myself, I know! Yet, here we were, tee-heeing over his JUST recent passage! (So to speak.) His long, torturous journey made us both howl with laughter!

Again, I say ... Why???

Speaking of pain, woman have been appreciating the “joy” of childbirth for as long as there HAVE been women! And the masses have been joshing about the distress brought on by contractions ever since.

A few years ago, there was an observation being passed around on the comedy circuit explaining what it felt like to have a child. It suggested you grasp your lower lip with both your hands. Move the lip around a bit until you get it all nice and loose. And then PULL IT OVER YOUR HEAD!!!

And we LAUGHED!

So, the next time you find yourself laughing at your spouse when they accidentally whack themselves on the thumb with a hammer, remember, what goes around, comes around. Sometime, in the near future, someone will most likely be screaming with laughter at your own discomfort.

Don’t take it personally. They can’t help it.

Anyway, getting back to business ...

(Where was I ... Oh ...!)

There is a CHANCE of the monsoon rains coming this evening. The weather “theys” (as in “THEY” say rain is coming) are telling us, for the first time in a while, there is a slight possibility.

I’m just hope when I see clouds building over the mountains, they aren’t smoke in disguise.

Just when you think it’s over, it ain’t over. And you can quote me.

That’s all. Yours in good humor,
The Other Stooge

Firing Off On Monday

Hooo whee!

That thang is STILL burning and is continuing to make people nervous. I confess, I am having a little bit of “survivor’s guilt” because the danger seems to have passed us by ... but those folks to the south and east of us are in the thick of things.

It has now burned almost 108,000 acres, breaking all sorts of records here in the Tucson area.

(“And the award for most destruction goes to ...!”)

The strong winds today are pushing the fire into more volatile material and causing problems for those poor firefighters who are trying to keep it in check.

This morning, I was down in the southwest ‘burbs visiting dad. My darling Danny suggested I drive east to see what I could see. So I did. But all that was visible was a smoky haze. I am supposing, because the winds are so strong today, it is blowing the smoke around, so no dramatic plumes appear. I didn’t see fire either because it was still in an area far from the road I was traveling on.

So, as you can see, the plague of fire is still upon us ... along with the other plague that is plaguing us. I would be waiting for the locusts, but there is nothing to eat! It all got burned away!!!

Oy! Vey! Ist! Mir! And THAT is our bi-lingual moment for today.

Halt!

Herr Feuer und Rauch

Tuesday's Installment

115,100 Acres and Counting.

Yes. You read that number correctly. Ewww!

The monster continues to grow. It's like that old horror movie "The Blob". It just keeps oozing into places it should not go and devours any poor thing in its wake. The winds were so strong yesterday, they couldn't fly any air support, so the fire has gained a lot of ground. The best thing that can be said (which, I believe, I have implied in a past writing) is that the fire is now on a much more level terrain making it easier to fight. The problem being having an immensely volatile fuel from that invasive grass. It fills in the gaps between native species that, otherwise, might not have caused the fire to burn so voraciously.

Yesterday, we had a not-so-welcome surprise up here in the northern region. The gods of wind and the gods of fire got together and had a baby and placed it back on the mountain ridge facing us. I looked out our kitchen window and saw a big ol' plume of smoke where there had been none for days. I guess the high winds fanned what embers that were still smoldering and caused another outbreak up here!!! My darling Danny and I went out last night and, on that site, we could still see a "necklace" consisting of gems of flame.

(Let's hope diamonds aren't forever ... Jeeeeeez!!!)

THANKFULLY, there is nothing there this morning. I suppose I shouldn't have been so cocky bragging about dodging the conflagration. That is what the Greeks called "cursing the gods".

Mostly, I didn't want to be reading about myself in the newspaper!

Send good vibes to the people in the midst of it all. And prayers for RAIN! Although we get titillating promises for monsoons ("maybe tomorrow"), it ain't happened yet.

(Hey, northeast peeps, wanna send any of your storms our way?)

Well, maybe now that the temperature has dropped to a cool, comfortable 96 degrees, maybe the fires will peter themselves out ... ya think?

With hope, in hope and ... hopefully!
Hope- along Cupassidy

Whatsup Wednesday

Well, well, well ...

FINALLY some better (dare I even write it? ... “good”) news regarding the fire. (“Fire? What fire? Is there a fire?”)

It is 54% contained. Dat’s good. 188,370 acres burned. Not so good. For the record, that is 310 square miles. Too many.

The winds have died down considerably, so they were able to use the heavy air tankers and helicopters on the far southeast edge of the fire that had been burning so badly in the past few days. Because of the favorable winds, the fire folks stopped the progression of the burn except for a few fingers of flame. There are still a few small “hot spots” scattered around, including near us, which are still in the high portions of the mountains. However they have decided to let them burn out while keeping a watchful eye.

That’s the good news.

However, we are still dealing with that COVID thang!

Which makes me think of obsessive/compulsive behavior.

Oh come now ... we all have a little bit of that living inside of each of us, dontcha think? There’s that little sumptin’, sumptin’ you like to have done just so or you get a little cranky. Or you NEED that first cup o’ coffee in the morning before you are ready for any contact with civilization. (You know who you are ... But, hey! I’m not judging.)

In reality, I come from a loooooong line of hypochondriacs, which is its own “special” form of obsessive behavior. (I know my relatives who are reading this right now are all thinking about the same person ... but I won’t take it personally.)

However, what brings me to touching on this subject, comes from my morning of doing errands outside my bubble of social isolation.

I had a few stops to make:

- the bike shop, where I delivered two bicycles belonging to my darling Danny which needed repair (I know, I know ... the bikes needed repair, not my Danny ... syntax ... sheesh ... talk about obsessive!)

- Walgreen’s, where I picked up some sundries (don’t you LOVE that word? ... “sundries”)

- then get a tetanus shot. (No. I didn’t impale myself on some rusty barbed-wire. I went on Medicare last year ... yes, I’m telling you I’m old ... and they require specific

inoculations in order to remain covered. WHO the heinie-bumber KNOWS when any of us last got a tetanus shot???)

I also went to Walmart to do some grocery shopping. (I use the word "some" VERY loosely as I didn't get out of there before I was skinned out of \$336.00! 336 DOLLARS! How did THAT happen? It MUST have been that extra jar of Snack-mm's dill pickles!)

ANYWAY, here's the obsessive/compulsive part. (FINALLY!!!)

This is my routine these days, after I come home from buying groceries in the outside world:

- BEFORE I even go in the house, I wash my hands for 25 seconds in the utility sink in the garage.

- if Dan isn't available to unload the groceries, I carefully unload the car, making sure the grocery bags, don't make contact with any surfaces in the house except for one section of our kitchen island.

- I put away the groceries, wiping down any product that is in glass and throwing away any cardboard

- I, then, spray down the counter with a disinfectant, followed by some soapy water

- THEN, I return to the car and wipe down anything I touched with a (RARE and RIDICULOUSLY HARD TO FIND) disinfectant hand wipe

- I go back into the house and strip off all my clothes (... I will wait while I give you a moment to lean into that mental image ...) and my mask and put them in the clothes hamper.

- after that, I, take another hand wipe and wipe down my glasses, sunglasses, cell phone, wallet and whatever credit card I used (I don't even THINK about cash these days!)

[... But WAIT! There's MORE!! ...]

- I find the eye glass spray you get from the optometrist and re-clean my glasses, sunglasses and cell phone

- I finally wrap things up by taking a shower

- OH! And one more thing! After I get out of the shower, I use eye drops to wash out anything that may have gotten in my eyes.

NOW, I'm done.

(..... inhale, exhale

Would you call that obsessive/compulsive?

(... ahem ...)

I know, there is a VERY fine line between being careful and having a mental illness. I recognize that, OKAY???) However, if I need to make myself feel comfortable

and safe in these times of rampant contagion, who are they (no, not the weather people) ... who are they to tell me I have gone off the edge? And I believe I still have my grip on SOME kinda reality. How else could I be able to speak of these ... um ... habits ... in a rational, even-keel manner?

So! All I will say is, as long as this COVID thing is lurking outside my front door, don't judge me and I won't judge you ...
... unless you aren't wearing a mask.

Yes, I realize, until now, I have been keeping you all abreast (love that word) of the fire ... but I can't help but add a little COVID-19 wariness into the mix. If one is going to be alarmed about something and wants to know how one can best cope with it, the more information one has, the better: fires OR viruses!

So from one hot spot in the middle of a great big one, I bid you adieu. And remember, you don't need a fire breathing its hot breath down your neck to be wary.

OCD can be your friend,
Your delicate flower

Thursday's Theses

Anyway ...

My darling Danny and I received a little hint of hopefulness yesterday, only to have those hopes dashed, cruelly, to the ground.

Recently, in order to de-tense from fire, plague, unrest and the general stress of dealing with fire, plague, unrest and general stress, we have taken to spoiling ourselves by partaking in a small glass of wine on our outside patio and decompressing from the day. Yesterday, as we civilly sipped, it slowly got darker and darker. Looking up, there were gray clouds coming over the mountains and moving overhead. ("Could it be ...?"). Well the next thing we knew, we were being pelted with a smattering of big fat rain drops. ("Monsoon! Monsoon!"). But as soon as we ran into the house ... NUH-THING. I mean, not even a spit's worth of damp sidewalk. Nada!

So close ... so close ...

Now this morning, however, there are more dark clouds coming over the mountainside, with the darkest of them hanging over the crest. We are even optimistically speculating that there MIGHT be some moisture falling up at the peaks near the space observatory telescopes. Wowie, Willie! I choose to believe that is what is occurring. Actually, I NEED to believe that is what is occurring.

So, what about the fire?

They (no, not the weather people) have stopped their daily video info posts ... which I take as a good sign. So I will give you the low-down from today's paper instead: 118,370 acres burned; 54% contained. The most active portion in the southwest and fingers of fire that overran the boundaries that were set up were stopped and "everything is looking good".

They (yes, the weather people) have actually issued a flash flood warning for the Catalina Mountains for today. There is a 30% chance of monsoon rain. BUT (there always is a flip side to everything) even though the moisture is welcome, the wildfires increase flood risks in the burn areas downstream.

WELL, BRING ON THE RISKS, BABY! POPPA WANTS A FIRE-FREE 'HOOD!!!
(Where am I? What just happened? Sorry, I just checked out for a moment ...)

And with that, I think I'd better stop for now..
(IS IT TIME TO SLOP DOWN SOME BOOZE YET? BARTENDER! TEE MARTOONIES!!!)

How Dry I Am,
Steven

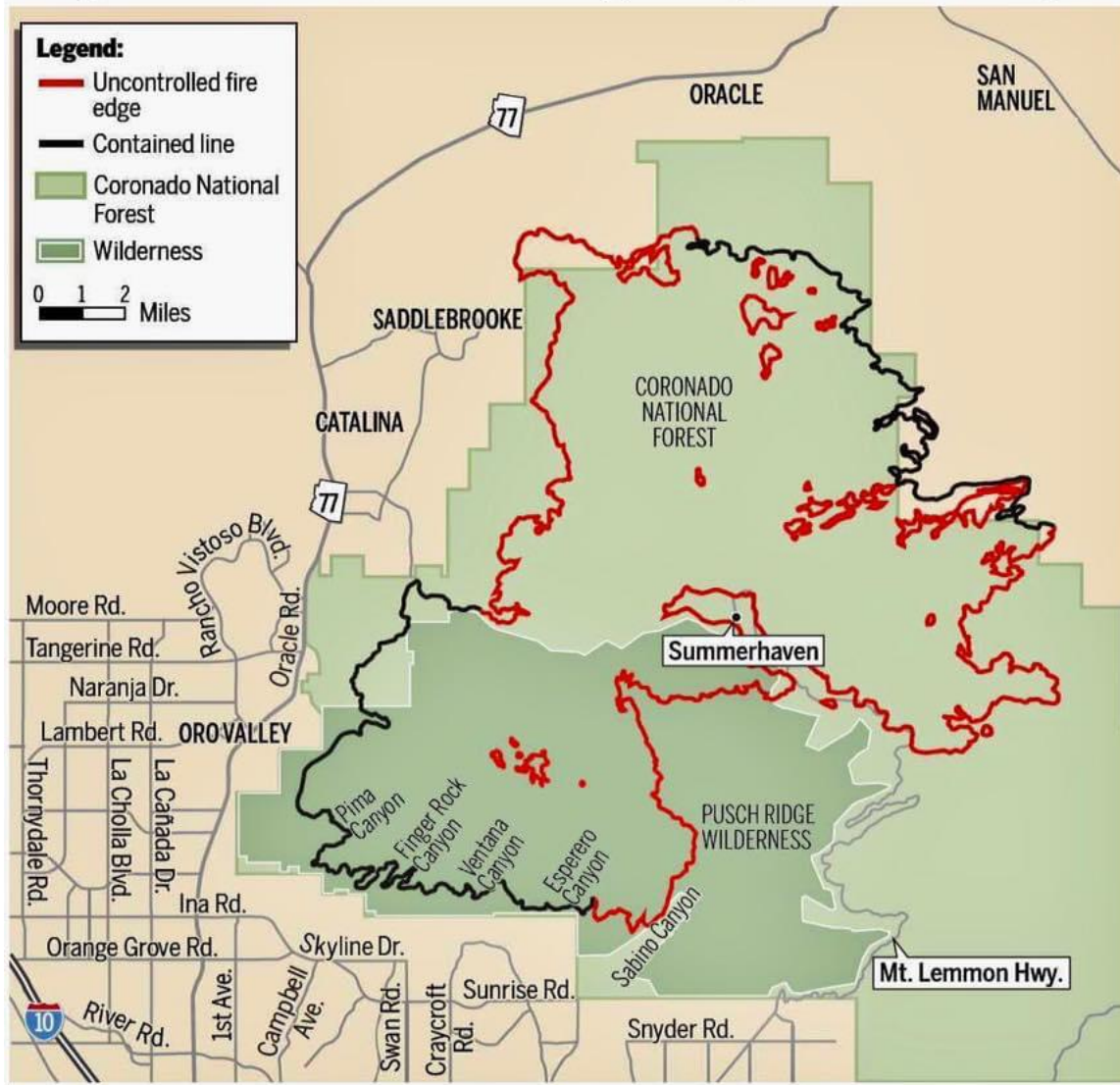
It's Friday AGAIN

Helloooooooo!

Here is a visual aid (at the bottom of this post ... with deep thanks to my research assistant, Daniel Engeljohn, PhD)

Bighorn Fire

The Bighorn Fire had reached 88,646 acres and was approximately 33% contained as of Friday.



6/28/20 SOURCE: Northern Rockies Incident Management Team

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Whatcha see here is a map showing the footprint of the fire. As is evident in the Legend, the red lines show the uncontrolled (meaning “still smoldering”) edge of the fire and the black lines show where it is contained. It even is showing SaddleBrooke (where I live). Wow! We finally rate!

Now, keep in mind the Santa Catalina Mountains are all within that footprint, with the highest peak being Mt. Lemmon (just to the northwest of where you see Summerhaven) at 9,100 feet. The incredibly steep mountain terrain is why it has been so difficult to fight this fire.

So where is Tucson proper? It is just south of the footprint. Skyline, Sunrise and Snyder are in the suburbs just a few miles north of the city limits.

SO! We stand at 118,900 acres burned and 58% contained (the numbers stated on the map are way wacky and out-of-date.)

Oh! It RAINED in Tucson yesterday. YES, you non-believers, it is true! Looking at the weather reports, it showed that there were showers in the southeast areas from about 6:00 to 9:00pm yesterday. Such good news; especially for where it was needed most. However, we, in the north, got a rock ... nuttin' honey! But, boy it looked promising there for a while.

And today? There are fickle clouds building over the mountains as they do in the present monsoon season. Well, when the rain DOES come (and it WILL happen someday), you will be reading about me in the papers because I will have torn all my clothes off (except for my mask, of course) and have run, screaming, into the deluge; after which I will be doing my wiggly happy dance as the authorities drag me off to the loony bin.

Wait ... never mind ... even I have been traumatized by that mental image. Instead, think of flowers and butterflies and no more intensely, threatening smoky blazes bearing down on you from above.

Calm ... at peace ...

Ohmmmmmm ...

Have I ever mentioned it is paradise here?

In nirvana,
The Old Man of the Valley

Saturday, July 4 - Happy Red, White 'n' Blue

Hello fellow patriots!

Well, what can I say today about our blaze?

You say, "Fire away!"

(Oh HaHaHaHaHaHa ... "Stop it, I'm slaying me!")

Anyway, it ain't over till it's over ... and it ain't over ... YET!

The good news (if there IS good news when writing of such a mess) is that the thing hasn't burned passed yesterday's boundaries, so they are now putting out the fire within the fire. They continue their "clean-up" work. The perimeters are looking excellent, with the most active edge in the east "looking good". There are a coupla hot spots that still require evacuation orders remaining in place. But, all-in-all, it is getting there.

But I got thinking ... All it will take is some loony exercising their "rights" to shoot off a payload of fireworks today in this tinder box and start the whole thing over again. You watch. (That was my New York cynic coming out. "Back, you curmudgeon, back!").

Okay ... something positive ... the rising humidity is helping the firefighting efforts. Plus, it is good for the skin (the humidity, not the firefighting efforts).

AND, it is the Fourth o' July!

We are having a bar-bee-que on steroids. No ... no one is coming over ... it is just my darling Danny and I. But we have pulled everything out of the freezer that can be cooked on the grill and will be charred up real good! Danny's philosophy is that if we are going to mess up the grill, we might just as well mess it up in bulk and in style. That way, we only need to clean it once. Plus, we will have a lot of cooked food we can return to the freezer, all prepared, neat and tidy for future easy meals. (He is so clever, that fella!)

So, on that Home and Garden note, I have to leave you now to uncover said grill in order to check to make sure no rattlesnake, packrat nor any other wild varmint has taken up residence that might prevent us from our intended patriotic celebration of gluttony.

Happy Fourth all y'all! Hope it IS happy and safe.

Your Li'l Miss Firecracker

ps - Late news ... No varmints.

Sunday in SaddleBrooke

Hello dear peoples!

What can Unca Steven write about to you today?

No news is good news. (Sorry. I am reduced to a cliché.)

Not much has changed in the land of fire since yesterday. Cleanup continues. Hot spots are being looked after. Smolderings are still smoldering. The top of Mt. Lemmon is still under evacuation. And my darling Danny and I ate BBQ last night. See? Nothing much has changed.

They (yes, the weather people) have us at hot (106) and dry. Beee-oo-tee-full blue skies. Not much wind. No rain.

I suppose one can say Sunday is a day of rest. (And, as hard as it may be to believe, I didn't make that up). So ... we are resting.

The great thing is, of course, with the fire becoming a non-issue (that is until the rains come and flood the valleys with uncontrolled run-off), we don't have ANYTHING to be concerned about. All is right with the world; no plagues to worry us, no social inequity to upset us; no politics to annoy us ... Just peace and quiet ...
... and then I woke up.

(Hey! Give me a break! I had a needed moment there.)

Of course, you realize, with the fire slowly going away, the original purpose of these ruminations is also disappearing. I AM hearing from some (delusional) folks that I should continue with these daily musings. What do you think? Would you be bored with my minutiae? I don't think my observations are all that exciting. But if the majority of you'uns want me to continue, please let me know. Otherwise, I will fade into the ether like an ember losing its fuel. And, believe me, I won't be offended if there ain't much response. My inner short-term focus is screaming to be released again.

Anyway, whatchoo think?

Thanks fer being there. I actually have enjoyed my reportin' 'n' ramblin'. But, for now, I am over and out.

Stay healthy. Stay happy. Wear a mask.

Smokeless air smooches,

Cupo

It's Monday and ...

I'm baaaaaaack!

Oh golly ... how LONG has it been? It seems like just yesterday ...

Anywho ... Consensus was to keep going. (You all know how to make a guy feel real good!) Thanks to those swell readers with questionable taste, I've decided I will keep plugging away. Thus, for now, I will continue sharing my feeble thoughts from what is left of my rapidly aging brain. (Anyone out there relate?)

Back to the FIRE!!! (My darling Danny has always said that I like "death and destruction". However, I firmly maintain that I simply like to be informed). It is 75% contained, with a little more of a burn, bringing it to just over 119,000 acres. Still, those figures are nothing to sneeze at, unless you are standing in the middle of a smoke field.

The only road up to the top of Mt. Lemmon is still closed. It is the only civilized way to get to Summerhaven and the observatories. They (no, not the weather people) have kept it closed while the firefighters use the road as a fire break to stop the last vestiges of les flames from skipping back into the suburbs. When all has been wrapped up in a tidy, non-active, equipmentless (I made that word up) bundle, the residents of the top of the mountain will be let back into their homes. Lordy, when you (I) think of it, the fire started on June 5th. Those poor folks have been out of their homes for a MONTH! So much for social distancing!

A few sentences ago, I referred to the road up to the top of Mt. Lemmon (officially known as the Catalina Highway) as the only "civilized" way to the top. There is another "road" to the apex of the summit, but it is a steep, dirt path coming from the opposite side of the rise, full of ruts, boulders and VARMINTS. ("Eeeek! Varmints!!").

HOWEVER, there are people who venture up using that route. As a matter of fact, my very athletic, hale, hearty and INSANE neighbor rode his BIKE up that "trail" last spring with a bunch of equally crazy fellas way past their prime! To my way of thinking, that is one H-E-double-hockey-sticks way of reliving ones' youth! They made it ... but, to no surprise, they were forced to walk their bikes part of the time.

Honestly, I need to commend them for their fortitude. However, personally, I'm happy to reclaim my remote past with a relaxing sit on my patio with a glass of wine in my hand. (... I can already hear my brothers saying, "We didn't have no patio! And we were too young to drink!!!")

You have your memories and I have mine.

In deep reverie,
Steven Roy

Tuesday's Trot Out

Oooooooooooooooooo, I have SUCH a glamorous life! Just this morning, I did a load of laundry. And for even MORE excitement, I went out and bought a Powerball lottery ticket! REALLY! But I didn't stop there! I got a scratch off ticket as well!!!! Truly! Now, don't be jealous. I am simply telling you the truth of, what I know to be my enviable life. You will just have to resign yourselves to be on the outside looking in.

And then I woke up.

Now, in truth, I am SO thankful for the life my darling Danny and I are living. And (I've said it before), in spite of little things like a conflagration outside one's front door, it is PARADISE here. I know, I know. I can hear yon naysayers in the East lamenting, "Isn't it HOT?" Well, yes. In June, July and August (and a little September), it's hot. But you learn to go out in the mornings and evenings. But when you DO go out at those times, and after you remark to yourself, "What a lovely evening this is!", you realize it is 102 degrees ... however, it feels great! Well, you all know, if you walk out of your house in New York or New Jersey or DC and it is 102, it's like walking into a WALL. So that drrrrrry heat makes a HUGE difference. And besides, that's why God made air conditioning.

Fire news? Good, good, good. The only wacky spot is still on the south side, but that is mostly brush and slow smolder. They (no, not the weather people) are FINALLY allowing those poor folks who own homes and businesses back up to Summerhaven. Granted, they need to be escorted up and are being asked not to stay until everything around them is completely under control. But, at least, they are getting to check on their properties ... not to mention their MAIL! (What? "Neither rain nor sleet nor snow nor gloom of night ..." doesn't apply here?).

Hey, speaking of mail. A shout out to my sister-in-law Alicia and my brother Mike in New Jersey for supplying Danny and I with long needed sanitation products. Tucsonians, I ask you ... WHEN was the last time YOU saw hand wipes and isopropyl alcohol on the store shelves??? Well, it seems New Jersey has oodles. So, thanks to the power of our postal service and the cleverness of my relatives, we are now in the lap of sanitation luxury.

Which brings me back to my opening statement ... "Oooooooooooooooooo, I have such a glamorous life!"

Can you now deny it?

Sumptuously,
The Earl of Cupo

Hot enuf fer ya?

Welllll ...

You Other-Coasters and Middlish Americaners can all be smug now. Tucson broke a record temperature yesterday for the month of July. The high was 113 degrees. (I will wait until the derisive sniggering and appalled gasps die down.)

...

But, like the wise and seasoned native Southwesterners that my darling Danny and I are, we remained in air-cooled comfort all day. That is to say until the mail came, which, for those of you who remain uninformed, is the high point of a retiree's day; superseding the need for said air-cooled comfort. Then, of course, BECAUSE we live in a desert (no, not "dessert" for them that cain't spell), when it turned cool and lovely in the evening, we had our sophisticated wine and dine (sans the dine part) on our veranda. AND IT WAS DANG LOVELY!!!

Butcha KNOOOW ... you up and over there in non-southwestern lands don't go frolicking out of YOUR doors when it is 15 below ... dooo ya? So don't get so judgmental, okaaaay?

As a matter of fact, when I was still a dazed Northern-type personality, I remember spending many a winter holed up in my digs, not daring ... no ... dreading ... no ... FEARING to put my big toe out the perimeter of my icy door jamb. Once (no, not "once", because a treacherous temperature plunge could happen at ANY time in them colder climbs ... so let's say ...) on ONE occasion, I remember, for a week every morning, in my little town of Rotterdam in upstate New York, the day began at 30 degrees below zero. (I will repeat myself for those who were not paying attention ... THIRTY DEGREES BELOW ZERO!!!!)

This was when I was in elementary school. We had to wait for the bus inside our homes, instead of the bus stop. Our gloved hands were pressed against the frosted window, watching for the bus as it neared the house. I say "gloved" because we had to already be fully snow-suited, hatted and scarved in order to be ready to hurtle ourselves outside at the first tinge of school bus yellow. Picture the poor bus driver watching 15 kids tearing at his vehicle, trying not to slip on the icy road for fear of squashing themselves under the moving bus tires. (Nice image.) I remember when I reached the questionable warmth of the bus seat, the fluid in my eyes had FROZEN over! It was almost as if my 10 year old eyes had suddenly developed cataracts!

And you complain about the heat ...

And THEN there was the time in the mid-1960's (which some of you repatriated upstate New Yorkers might remember) when it snowed for FIVE days! A Nor'easter, as

they (YES, the weather people) like to call them, came screeching up from the south and dumped two and a half feet of snow on the already one and a half feet we had from a previous snowfall. That Nor'easter (quaint word for a NOTSO quaint phenomenon) was blown out to sea by a Canadian Clipper (also ... so quaint) that replaced it and dumped ANOTHER two and a half feet (and more) of snow on top of what was there. In the end, we ended up with SEVEN feet of snow.

Do you know what that means? You can't even look out your first floor windows! And even the snow plows, in spite of working day and night, have a impossible task of clearing the roads. I have a picture (Polaroid, thank you) of my younger brother Mike standing on top of a snow pile across the street from our house. His head is even with the top of the telephone pole!!! If my poor father and my older brother, John, had not tandem shoveled our little square of a driveway day and night, my long suffering mother, who was an operating room nurse, would have never been able to get to the car and actually get to her job!

I also recall, in a fit of "daring do" and not having safety in the forefront of my mind, being determined to clear the front walkway. I climbed out on the roof of our small front portico (of course, after, first, shoveling the snow off the roof by leaning out my bedroom window) and began to clear away the top of the snow above where I thought the walk approximately was. When I was on my stomach and couldn't reach the snow any longer, I went downstairs, grabbed a step ladder, placed it under the portico and continue the shovel. Once I had exposed a teeny part of the sidewalk, I continued climbing up and down the ladder to carve a path to the street. It took me three days (no school). It looked like a canyon ... albeit a life threatening canyon, but a canyon none-the-less.

Back to the present, I have decided that Hell is FREEZING cold and not the fire and brimstone made out in books and culture. Satan's domain is glacial peaks and brutal, icy bone-chilling gales. Damnation would consist of an eternity of having your sinews absolutely, painfully frozen through and through.

And that's what I love about the South ... west.

Warmly yours,
Living in Margaritaville

Accidentally on Purpose

So then ...

... yesterday evening, as my darling Danny and I relaxed and wound down with our white and red libations (mine white, his red), he half commented, half inquired, now that the fire was fairly well gone, what will be the purpose of my daily blog-thing? (He didn't actually say "blog-thing". If you remember, that's what I am calling it). I said I didn't think it NEEDED a purpose. It was just going to be a train of thought kind of thang. However, he said he felt readers needed to know the purpose up front. I was going to aver, "WELL WITH ALL THAT HAS BEEN GOING ON, THE PURPOSE IS TO KEEP ME SANE!!!" But I demurred. Instead, I assured him that, as I had absorbed from a writing class in college, lo, MANY years ago, I would give the reader an idea of what was to be broached on a daily basis at the onset of each amusing musing. (I didn't say "amusing musing" either. However, one can never have enough snappy alliterations, can one?)

... ANYWAY ...

As I was saying ... I would not limit these scribblings to one "purpose" over the grand scheme of things. (It's a scheme alright!)

Which got me to thinking, at this stage of playing my Game of Life, what IS my purpose? When I was young and ohhhhhhh soooooo naive, I used to tell myself my purpose in life was to make other people happy. Well THAT didn't hold up for long. Somehow, as I wended my way along my little path, there ended up being a lot of folks whom I certainly did NOT make happy and actually became down right hostile toward me. It took me a while to figger out, no matter how hard I tried, I was bound to fail at some relationships either through my own carelessness or the other individual's perceptions or actual misguided intentions. (I am stating this because so many of you have such incredibly perfect lives, you aren't aware that this occurs to some people ... cough!)

But then, on the other hand, being completely oblivious (as I originally was in my remote youth) can actually work in our favor. Here's an metaphorically infused example that JUST popped into my pea-brain (with HUGE apologies to my DEAR pal, Judy, who, may or may not want to divulge her true identity after the telling of this story.)

Judy is an enormously gifted actress, singer and stage personality. Her ability to interpret ANY sort of written material and make it personal is a true talent. Well, Judy put together a wonderful one-woman performance of song and stories that was presented on a quite prestigious stage in DC. There she was, opening night with a packed house, beautifully interpreting her material; mesmerizing her audience. She

made them laugh and cry and think and be moved by her magical, heart-felt performance. It wasn't until after her standing ovation and coming off stage that she discovered she had done the entire show with her blouse on inside out.

(Pause for chuckles at Judy's expense.)

...

Which brings me to my point. The very best way we can express our purpose is by going through life with blinders on, as it were. Otherwise, we will always be distracted by our own realization that our "clothes are inside out". If we can rise above the imperfections we ALL carry with us and accept they are simply part of who we are, we will be free to open ourselves to creating the magic we innately have to offer to the world which makes us special.

So! What IS my current purpose in life? It is to be myself ... and be special.

And, of course, to TRY to keep my clothes on right side out.

Thought ya'd might wanna know.

In a philosophical mood,
StevieC

ps - The fire says hello, but is going away now.

Oooops!

Have YOU ever made such a huge blunder in public you feel so humiliated you will never go to that particular destination ever again?

No?

Me neither.

Okay!

Next chapter.

Steven

Ohhh, if only that were true!

However, I had a doozy of a glitch I feel sadly motivated to confess to you ... in order to relieve my tormented soul, of course.

And besides, you aren't a judgmental group, ARE YOU????

In this tale, you will find yourselves in Kansas City, Missouri and Tombstone, Arizona which, if it wasn't for my foopah, really wouldn't have much at all in common.

Most every year in recent memory, my darling Danny, our pal Cindy from DC and I would travel to Kansas City to visit our great friends Judy and her beau, Bill.

(Yes, that is the same Judy of the backward blouse incident.)

One year, while Danny and I were still living in Washington, DC, MUCH to our surprise and chagrin, Judy and Bill moved to Kansas City. They was our besties and they was desertin' us to face the ravages of DC-land alone. So, Danny, Cindy and I took it upon ourselves to barge in on them once a year to remind them of the wonderful people they had left behind.

If you've never been to Kansas City, you really are missing something! When approaching it from the north, it looks like the Emerald City from "The Wizard of Oz". And there is SO much to do; great restaurants, museums and entertainment.

OH! Before I tell you of my own lapse and have reminded you of Judy's unfortunate gaff, I feel compelled to include my Danny in the goof club.

There is a great section in Kansas City called The Paseo. Running through that area is a small stream with a ribbon of park lying on either side of it. One afternoon, Judy, Bill, Cindy, Danny and I were driving along the boulevard that lines the park. Suddenly, Danny called out, "There's a bald eagle!"

Making that observation was not too surprising. The Kansas City area has quite a population of bald eagles. That, combined with the fact that, a few years before, Danny had acquired the appellation of "old eagle eyes".

You see, when Danny and I went on a cruise to Alaska, we took a day trip on a small boat to look at wildlife. Danny kept spotting the bald eagles WAY before the onboard guide did. Hence, the epithet. He was “eagle eyed” ... literally!

Anyway, Bill was particularly excited because he is a wonderful amateur photographer with a distinct preference for birds. Unfortunately, he had been driving the car a little too fast so that none of us saw the eagle except for Danny. Well! Bill found a bridge to cross over the creek and swung the car back around the park with the hope that the eagle would still be there.

But when we breathlessly got back to the spot ... no eagle.

Caught on a bush was a black garbage bag with a little bit of white trash hanging out of it.

Ooooooo we howled!

Now that I talking of blunders, I am reminded that even strangers can have their own flubs which turn into hours of hilarity.

We had decided to go out to a club to hear some noted local singer and her combo perform a cabaret gig. It POURED that night and we arrived wet and bedraggled. The cabaret room had not yet opened, but the front bar had some empty tables. So we settled in and tried to dry off. As we were sitting there, some middle aged guy came up behind Cindy and enthusiastically asked, “Are you the headliner??” We weren’t sure if he was kidding or trying to pick her up. Maybe both. Cindy finally made a small laugh and told him he was mistaken. He didn’t quite believe her, insisting she looked like the woman he had come to see. We really had to “pry” him away from her, but we finally got rid of him. However, for a long time after that, Cindy was referred to as “The Headliner”.

Now that I’m on a roll regarding that night, I have to tell you about bad behavior by our group.

Two friends of Judy and Bill joined us, so we had quite a cadre. When the cabaret room opened, in order to sit together, the only chairs we could find open were in the front row. We realized our HUGE error when the real headliner started to sing. She was AWFUL. No, not just AWFUL. DREADFUL! After, what seemed to be an eternity, the word got whispered around that we would leave as soon as possible, BEFORE the show ended. But, because we were in the front row and wanted to be polite, it was agreed that we would subtly slink out one at a time.

Our first person rose to go ... and the whole group of us stood up as well! I don’t know why. I suppose we were so desperate to get out of there. We stampeded out en masse ... giggling at ourselves when we got to the front bar!

So much for being subtle and polite.

Anyway ... on to my faux pas.

One of the things we did while visiting the Kansas City area was drive out to Kearney, Missouri to visit the childhood home of Jesse James and its adjoining museum. It was a fun day of interest as we expanded our historical horizons.

It was, we discovered, just one of the many points of interest we took advantage of each year while visiting our pals.

Okay now ... leap forward a few years.

Danny and I moved to Tucson and were taking advantage of the many points of interest in THIS area. We decided to go visit Tombstone, which is barely a couple of hours drive from our home.

Tombstone is the very place you heard of: the O-K Corral gunfight. Wyatt Earp. Boot Hill and Jewish Cemetary (Not makin' that up!). And the landmarks are all still there. The O-K Corral is completely intact! Even much of the storefronts in the old town have not changed. Yes, you have to put filters on with regard to some of the tackier t-shirt shops ...and the "re-enactment" of the shoot-out can be skipped. But, otherwise, it is a lot of fun.

Well, we liked it so much, we went back a few months later. I had read in the Tucson paper there was going to be a special exhibit at the museum in the former city hall/court house about the gun fight and all the characters who were originally involved in it. There even would be personal effects and letters from family members. So we drove down there again and made a special point to go see the display. We spent a good deal of time looking around, reading and inspecting the artifacts. It was a very good collection.

As we were leaving, Danny had to go to the restroom. So, while I waited, I struck up a conversation with the girl at the information desk. I was excited about telling her about when we had been in Missouri and saw Wyatt Earp's childhood home. How we had spent the day talking to the docents there, learning about the history. And now, here we were in Tombstone where he ended up. I must have spoken to her for a good fifteen minutes. Granted, it was a little long, but I was enthusiastic about sharing my experience. She was so nice to me; she kept nodding and smiling.

Of course, Danny had come out by then. He listened for a while, then told me he would wait for me outside.

When I was finally finished and was coming down the steps outside of the courthouse, Danny casually said to me, "You know it was Jesse James' house and not Wyatt Earp's."

I froze.

Then, I did what any normal person would do:

I SCREAMED!

Right there on the court house steps of Tombstone, Arizona, I screamed!

And then I ran away. FAST!

I had blabbed on and on to that girl at the INFORMATION BOOTH about Wyatt Earp's home and Wyatt Earp's family ... blah, blah, blah, blah, blah and she just kept smiling and nodding!

It was Jesse James' childhood home we had visited!!!

Thank goodness, Danny had the discretion to wait until after we had left the building to tell me! Even so, I scurried away as fast as I could and never looked back.

Such an idiot!

So, next time you get the urge to "mansplain", whether or not you are of the male persuasion, remember to get your clothes on correctly, your eyes checked, know who, in fact, you are going to see and always, always get your facts straight. With that checklist in hand, you should be alright.

Believe me, I know.

Bewitched, bothered and bewildered,

... Am I,

Mr. Addlepatad Scatterbrained

Everything's (almost) up to date in Kansas City

While I have Kansas City on the mind, I will delve further into a few of our adventures in and around the Paris of the Plains, the City of Fountains, the BBQ AND the Jazz Capital(s) Of the World.

Quite a list of distinctions, I must say.

Visiting Judy and Bill over the years has been tons o' fun; MORE than fun. They have been generous friends and great hosts, always welcoming us with open arms and a hyperactive dog ... Snuggles. They actually have two dogs, but Ben is so laid back, he is practically part of the furniture ... that is, until the front door is open. Then Ben hears the call of the wild and tries his best to become part of it.

They live north of Kansas City on a beautiful lake called Lake Waukomis. It actually is a reservoir with a dam on one end. The dam has a spillway across it where the road, in rainy times, sometimes gets overwhelmed with water, mud and debris. Once the water recedes, with all the mud left behind, one needs to be verrrry careful. My darling Danny once played "Slip 'n' Slide" while walking across it one morning. He came back to the house covered in good ol' mid-west muck! Ew!

Judy was originally from the Kansas side of K.C., so it was no biggie for her to move to the area. She always wanted to live on a lake, so when Bill and she visited friends there and saw that house, it was an easy decision to take the leap.

Danny, Cindy and I loved it when Bill took us out on the lake in their boat. However, due to the fact that they lived on a shallow cove, if it was a dry season, there wasn't always enough water to float their boat (so to speak). We discovered mud isn't a good medium for waterside fun.

THAT said, when the circumstances WERE right, Bill would take us for a RIDE. Of course, the poor guy had to put up with a lot of hinting and not-too-subtle bellyaching beforehand on our part in our desperate need for attention and amusement.

K.C. has SO much to DO! Bill and Judy took us everywhere. The Train Museum in Union Station was a favorite of mine. However, the city must have tried to save money by putting the American Jazz Museum and the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in the SAME building. I am still trying to figure that one out.

We also went out of town a lot to visit places of interest. For example, the Eisenhower Library and Museum in Abilene, Kansas and the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri were just two destinations. After visiting the Jesse James ... no ... Wyatt Earp ... no ... Jesse James homestead, Danny made the observation, "We sure do go to see a lot of dead people."

That's what tourists do, Danny. That's what tourists do.

We also liked to visit a little town nearby named Liberty. It had a quaint town square with a FAVORITE antique store on it, called Main Street Goods and Goodies. We were used to the high prices of DC, so we were SHOCKED at how reasonable these were.

(Ya just gotta get outta them cities, folks!)

Although, on another occasion, Danny, Cindy and I (and I'm not sure why it was just the three of us) went to Liberty to visit the first bank robbed by Jesse James. When we finally figured out how to get in, there was no one in the building except the docent, who was scowling at us from a desk she was sitting at. We began to look around, when she scolded us by saying, "If you want the tour, you have to pay!" We were so shocked and intimidated, we groveled, "Yes, yes, we'll take the tour." We each plopped down our \$15 and waited for the grand tour to start.

She got up from her chair, unlocked the door next her and strode into a side room. Apparently, this had been the main bank. We shuffled in after her. She, then, fastened the door behind us.

For the next hour, she didn't MOVE! This was the tour!!! We were STUCK! She droned on and on and on. Honestly, it gave true meaning to the phrase "captive audience". But it wouldn't have been so bad if she hadn't decided to pointedly include her own political and social agenda in the historical talk. She was deeply offended how women were treated back then. And even more offended how they are treated today!

Look, I agree there are unbelievable injustices in the disparities of the sexes ... but, at that moment, on that day, all we wanted was a nice tour of the bank that Jesse James robbed. It ended up being less his-tory and more her story. (See what I did there?)

When her breath finally ran out, she sourly asked, "Are there any questions?" We all exclaimed, "NO!!!" just a liiiittle too quickly. Shrugging her shoulders, she opened the passage to freedom and allowed us to escape. Unsteadily, we pretended to show interest in some books that were for sale, but then hopped, skipped and jumped out of there like lunatics! When we finally were released onto the street, we roared with laughter!

I, however, couldn't help but being left with a creepy feeling we were lucky to actually have gotten out of there with our lives.

But back to Kansas City ...

Great food! Especially the barbeque. I suppose that goes without saying, but ... great barbeque!!

Danny and I wanted to try one particular place that we saw on "Diners, Drive-ins and Dives"; a BBQ joint on the Kansas side of K.C. called Roscoe's. We located it in a "warehousey" area by some railroad tracks. Weird 'hood; FABulous food! You ordered your desired vittles at the counter, then brought it to your table. We chose a booth,

which we all managed to squeeze into. After having a delicious lunch and a lot of laughs, it was time to go. Bill got out first, but couldn't find his hat. He had come in wearing one. We looked under the table, we looked in the men's room; we even searched the garbage bin. No hat. Well, there was nothing to do but leave. When Judy slid out of the booth, the hat fell to the floor. She had been sitting on it the whole time!

I think it took about an hour for us to calm down. We were going to a glass making factory next, so we really had to get a hold of ourselves. (Can you say, "bull in a china shop?")

There was also another time when we went completely berserk.

Just before one of our first visits to Kansas City, Bill and Judy had purchased a second hand golf cart to get them around their neighborhood. The main road circled the lake, but the terrain was VERY hilly with lots of dips and curves. Bill was out of the country at the time (he regularly taught classes on hostage negotiation) so, it was just the four of us: Judy, Danny, Cindy and I. Judy offered to take we visitors for a tour around the lake in the golf cart. We leapt at her proposition. We piled in; the women in front and the guys in the back.

Now, the thing about this golf cart was that it had a dicey electrical system. If you found yourself on a hill with juuust a little too much of an incline, the cart would give up the ghost. Judy THOUGHT they had it repaired, so "she was game if we were game." The cart actually did pretty good for most of the trip around the lake. There WERE a couple of times it wasn't too happy. But if Danny and I jumped off, it would make it to the summit. However, about three-quarters of the way around, the inevitable struck. It died going up a particularly challenging slope. Now we had to push. Judy stayed at the wheel and the three of us got out and put our shoulders into it. (Heave ho!)

The combination of the cart truly not working and the steepness of the gradient, caused us to really struggle in our efforts to get it to the top.

Suddenly, a pickup truck came our way and slowed down to a stop just next to us. We all were thinking, "Thank gosh, someone is here to come to our aid!". The woman at the wheel rolled down her window and sweetly said, "Can you tell me how to get to ...?"

We SHRIEKED in her FACE!

Clearly, we were slogging this thing up the hill and, instead of offering a helping hand, she wanted directions!!!

The irony was apparently lost on her.

Quickly, she rolled her window back up and drove away, leaving us howling in her dust!

I never did hear where she wanted to go.

Yes, Kansas City holds some great memories:

- late night raids to Sheridan's Frozen Custard for the Razzle-Dazzle; raspberries, chocolate and pecans over vanilla deliciousness
- the Sunday morning downtown farmer's market buying food and hats and antiques
- breakfast at Succotash eating 20 layer rainbow cake AFTER stuffing ourselves on pancakes and French toast
- afternoons on their veranda, watching the hummingbirds and herons and Canadian geese

... wonderful memories!

I just wish they had a better airport!!!

("Here we go!")

You would think, with ALL that cachet, they would manage to bring their airport up to the 21st century! Maybe they have by now, but not the last time we were there.

Not that I'm complaining ... but I am.

It's not just the off-putting smell of rancid French fry oil you are smacked in the face with after you go through security. Nor is it the matter of, in THIS day and age, them having about three electrical outlets to service ALL the customers for four airlines. It's the fact that, once you get through security, there is only ONE men's room with only ONE urinal and ONE toilet for the entirety of that terminal. I never EVER again want to be forced to use the garbage can because someone is in the ONLY stall. (May I suggest you rid any kind of image of that unfortunate incident from your brain as soon as you possibly can.)

(Okay. I'm off my soapbox of privilege now.)

I have found that Kansas City to be a wonderful place, full of everything a person could want. The food, entertainment and history give you endless possibilities for recreation and relaxation. Our dear friends Judy and Bill have been more than awesome to us, for which we are SO grateful.

Just don't get to the airport any earlier than you really have to.

Bon voyage!

Missouri 'mo

Blanking Out

Well now ...

Where was I? What did I want to write about? ... hmm ... OH Yes! ... Memory. SUCH an ephemeral thing is my memory; easy come, easy go. Now ALL you young'uns (which, of course, is most of you) have NO idea what I am talking about, so allow me to explain. Suppose you see a great meme on Snapchat and, a short time later, you want to share it with a friend, but the thing has disappeared from your files. THAT is the fleeting reality of my memory these days. Oh sure, the old stuff is still in there (sorta), but that is like having a printed newspaper (remember those?) stored on some dusty shelf in my brain. Butcha know, even newspapers fade, turn yellow and crumble away. (... not unlike the process the rest of my body is currently going through.)

And my memory's unreliability isn't just a recent thing.

Several years ago, I introduced my dear friend Judy (... the one-in-the-same Kansas City Judy) as Sue Simpson. Obviously Sue is NOT her first name and Simpson certainly isn't her last name either. Thankfully, Judy just looked at me for a moment as if to say, "whattayou nuts?", then burst out laughing. That is one of the MANY things I love about Judy; her ability to laugh at ANY situation, especially if it involves herself. As a matter of fact, (Judy ... you are getting TWO Judy stories in this blog-thing!) as much of a professional she is and remarkable she is on stage, she almost inevitably goes "up" at least once when performing her cabaret show.

(For youse unsophisticates who ain't done been exposed to the-A-ter talk, "going up" means to forget your words or lyrics). However, when her memory fails her, our Judy always simply laughs at herself and allows the audience to join her in her faux pas. (So endearing!)

Recently, Judy and I were talking (Judy! A THIRD reference!) about how both of our brains were turning to mush; particularly when it came to remembering names. Once I introduced Judy as Sue Simp ... oh, wait ... did I already tell you that? ... Sorry ... my memory ...

There IS something memory related goings-on in the past few years that has me questioning, not just my ability to remember, but my sanity.

A year or so before I moved to paradise ... (Remember I told you Tucson is paradise when it is not burning up? REMEMBER?????) ... anyway, before I moved, a fella contacted me on Facebook with the hopes of trying to re-acquaint himself with one of my oldest friends, Marilynn. He wrote that he knew Marilynn and I were old friends and since all three of us worked together at Gaslight Village (a theme park in the Adirondack Mountains I will save for my next musing) over a couple of summers, he figured, if he

could find me on Facebook, odds were I knew how to get in touch with her. Innocent story right? Easy request, yes? I HAD ABSOLUTELY NO MEMORY OF HIM AT ALL! Nothing! Not a face. Not the name. No recollections of times past. Bupkis!

Shakily (glad I was typing), I wrote back to him, saying I would need to ask Mar if she wanted to give out her contact info. When I wrote to her, she was flabbergasted I couldn't remember him. She tried to jar my brain by describing what he looked like and his sweet personality and things we did together. I got NOTHIN'.

Now look, I might have an excuse here (saying, as he grasped for straws). I did have brain surgery in 1998 (another future blog-thing), so maybe they (No, not the weather people) tap-danced on a memory lobe or two. So I have an excuse. Right? RIGHT????!?!?!? To this day, I can't recall him at all.

And it isn't just this one case. There is another fella with whom there is a memory gap, that I have let go on far too long. But now it is embarrassing.

This splendid, sweet, friendly person, who had been reading these original blog-thingses ... is a COMPLETE and TOTAL blank. As it was with that other guy: I have ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. I don't remember ... well ... ANYTHING; his face, how we met or interacting with him. The truly mortifying thing about this is we have been writing to each other on Facebook for many years now. He contacted me with a friendly hello. And me, being the amiable (at times) guy that I am, friendly "helloed" him back. Afterward, I searched him on Facebook and found pictures of the guy with good friends of mine, so it helped me place the time of my life when we supposedly met. But I was too embarrassed to tell him the truth. And now, it has gone WAAAAY past humiliating to reveal the facts to him at this point of the game. It's just weird and wrong after, what, SIX years? Maybe it isn't the brain surgery. Maybe it is something more logical, like I was previously living in a parallel universe where he wasn't around. Then, I was accidentally bumped into this plane where he exists; something sane and logical like that.

Memory ...

So, when I figure out when I cross the line into full dementia, I will try to remember to let you know. In the meantime, I intend to TRY to keep doing what my friend Judy (FOUR references, Judy!) does; attempt to laugh at myself and share it with my audience.

(... except if it's been six years ...)

By the way, who ARE you people?

Dory

(... the animated fish who had short term memory loss ... don't you REMEMBER???)

My life is a theme park

So okay ...

Gaslight Village.

Now, we are all going to learn about a place of self-discovery in the guise of a family oriented, somewhat low-budget, often surprising, now departed theme park. I say “all”, because so many of my friends have worked there, visited there or was traumatized there over the years of its existence.

Before I continue, I have to give a huge thanks to my friend, Marilyn who helped me fill in the blanks where my memory failed me. (If that concept of memory loss seems vaguely familiar, please see the previous blog-thing.)

Gaslight Village was an amusement park that existed near the shore of the southern tip of Lake George in the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York (YAY! A geography lesson!) It was built in 1959 by local construction magnet, Charlie Wood (who was a character unto himself!) and closed in 1989. Its theme was oldsy-timesy 1890's Americana. Walking around, you would be constantly aware of tinkling, turn-of-the-century music. Half of the park had your typical carnival-type rides and the other half was an imagined recreation of a typical small town in 1890's U.S. of A. This consisted of small buildings representing a general store, a smithy, a doctor's office and other establishments we've come to associate with that time in our history.

However, the focus of the park was the Opera House. The Opera House featured “round-the-clock” entertainment and your basic non-1890's food of pizza and hamburgers. That was where I (and SO many of my friends) fit in. It was a huge hall of a building with a cement floor, tiered seating, a stage with a bandstand, a bar (off limits to the rabble) and an ice rink (yes) of about 11 by 11 feet in front of the stage.

The head of entertainment happened to be my high school theatre (and special ed) teacher, Jack Sheehan (may he rest ...). The Opera House, of course, needed waiters and waitresses to serve said hash house fare to the tourists. The caveat was that the staff had to be able to sing. You see, because the watch cry there was “continuous entertainment”, we, the serving staff, were required to abandon our stations in between acts and entertain the customers. More than once, I would hear my name being called out by the emcee (Floyd Vivino and later Steve Potfora). I would drop my tray of pizza and beer, apologize to my cranky patrons and run up to the bandstand and sing my prepared song or two in my straw hat and greasy red and white striped shirt. The great thing, however, was that, being directly out of high school, it was a GREAT education on how to perform in ANY circumstance. Neither loud, vacating audience members, nor

burnt pizza smell, nor screaming babies, nor cigarette smoke filled haze stopped us from doing our appointed sets.

In spite of the nuttiness, it really was fun. In part, because Jack not only taught at my high school, he went to the same college I did (SUNY at Geneseo). So when he hired, he recruited my friends from high school AND from college. Such nepotism!

And, OH, the entertainment for which we were filling the gaps was unique and special!

First it was the pianists playing day and night on that ragtime piano. I learned SO much of the American songbook from those impossibly hard working people (Thank you Marilynn. Thank you Steve.)

Aside from that, there was a melodrama, complete with villain, hero, heroine and vamp. They did their thing four times a day.

My favorite story from that show happened early on. At one point, the Vamp is supposed to say to the Villain, "Walk this way" and then bump-and-grind her way off the stage. The Villain would turn to the audience and say, "If I walked that way, I'd kill myself!" (Old burlesque material.) Well one show, instead of saying the line as written, the Vamp, played by my friend Liz, said, "Walk just like this and did her wiggle walk off the stage. The poor Villain just looked at the audience and shrugged. Apparently poor Liz didn't get the joke. After that, the actor playing the Villain sure made certain she knew.

(... I can tell no one is laughing ... I guess you had to be there.)

And, of course the ice show was swell, despite the skaters performing on a postage stamp. Part of the excitement was watching in amazement that nobody got killed in the process of doing their show; definitely a tribute to their professionalism.

However, this was the first time I met ... (shhh) ... gay people. Nice guys who were respectful of having so many "kids" around. But I knew something about them were slightly "enhanced" from the people I had encountered up to that point in my life. One of the guys rarely took off his stage makeup. If he did, there was always a not-so-subtle dash of mascara. (I have to give credit to my parents for a decent upbringing, because my only thought was, "To each his own". Dontcha know, it was a harbinger of what was to come in MY life.)

But the very, very best part was the vaudeville acts. They were the type of show people you would only see on Ed Sullivan. These performers and musicians were a part of the dying realm of vaudeville ... I was lucky enough to get to watch them day after day, night after night.

- Warren Boden, the banjo man

- Bob Carroll, the ventriloquist

- Joe Jackson, Jr., the clown

- Mario Manzini, the escape artist who also was an Elvis impersonator! (Picture Elvis in a straight jacket!)

But my very, very, very favorites were the Bob Hermine's Royal Lilliputians, an honest-to-goodness ... what they (no, not the weather people) used to call a "midget" act. This was an act that had fled Germany in the late 1930's. After playing Paris and London, they ended up in Hollywood appearing in several films, including, yep, "The Wizard of Oz". The act was emceed by Freddie, who couldn't participate in the acts anymore because, in his later years, had grown to about five feet. He was married to Ruthie, who was the smallest of them all. She did a tap dance to "Walking My Baby Back Home". And at the end of the show, she was a baton twirling majorette. Even in her tall hat and high heels, the top of the hat barely reached my chest. Elizabeth (who could cook like a fiend) wore a gown and made a picture out of pieces of felt. That was it. Music played and she made the same picture every show! I can still hear Freddie sending her off with a rousing, "Eleezabet!"

The best were Butch, Pepi and a third man (I don't remember his name) doing "acrobatics". Now remember, by this time, the guys are all in their 60's and 70's. They would come out and do a somersault, stand up straight with their arms in the air and yell "Hachie Bachiie"!! Then they would leap frog over each other and stand and yell, "Hachie Bachiie"!! The end of their act, they would grab each other's ankles and roll off the stage like a steam roller.

I tell you, I have to hand it to them. I couldn't do that now at my age!

Anyway, I learned SO much about life and a lot about myself in those years. I strengthened and formed bonds of friendship that still, to this day, have not been broken.

I, also, formed psychological scars from waiting tables.

But certainly I was part of something that will never exist again. But even more than that, I truly was left with the sense of being part of history.

And I will always be grateful.

Hachie Bachiie!!

Stevie

Curious Cat

I was an inquisitive child.

Now, some people might want to call it obnoxious. BUT ... you say obnoxious, I say inquisitive ... “toMAto, toMAHto” ...

As I have in the past, I will blame being curious on genetics as well. We Cupo’s are tinkerers. We like to dig into things ... even if those things aren’t ours (more on that later.) We figure out how stuff works or how it’s made or how much it costs or where it comes from or ...

... you get the picture.

My poor father was a big tinkerer. If something was needed or a device was lacking, rather than buy some appropriate item, he would find something around the house and jerry rig it (or jury rig, depending where you hail from), turning it into a functioning component that fulfills the current need.

My darling Danny talks about one of the times he observed my dad’s proclivity for inventiveness while visiting my parent’s house in Schenectady.

My long suffering mother couldn’t open a jar of spaghetti sauce. And it frustrated her when she had to ask for help (... runs in the family). So my dad pondered on it for a while, went to his little work bench and returned with a heavy duty hacksaw blade. He jimmied the blade into the underside corner of one of the kitchen cabinets with the teeth facing the crook where the two sides of the cabinet came together. Now, when you needed a jar opened, you jammed the lid between the saw blade and the corner and, with a slight twist, it easily opened.

I think I inherited the puttering bug from him. I am pretty good about making something from nothing ... however, I believe my forte is observing how something works and the mechanism of what makes it tick.

Now, this curiosity doesn’t just apply to things of a mechanical nature. I like to watch science shows about The Bubonic Plague or nature programs on sinkholes that swallow buildings and people in one horrifying catastrophe. As I think I’ve said before, Danny accuses me of having a fascination with death and destruction. That’s not it AT ALL. I want to KNOW what CAUSES the death and destruction. There is a DIFFERENCE ... albeit subtle, but a difference none-the-less.

When I was very young, my pitiable relatives would always walk a fine line between looking forward to have a visit from sweet little, curly haired Stevie, and dreading the idea of having to hide or lockup every personal item they had that I could get my tiny hands into.

I loved drawers. Just loved them. Over my formative years, I saw more of my kinfolk's folded undies than I can count. Although, I once received such a trauma from my little habit, I swore off from doing it (well ... for, at least, a little while.)

I had dropped in on the home of my elementary school librarian, who lived down the street from me. When she walked out of the room to get us some iced tea, I opened a drawer in a side table. I saw fifty eyes looking back at me! Apparently, due to her own unfortunate state of missing one eye, she collected ones made of glass!

I didn't open too many strange drawers after that.

Even my darling Auntie Vera, my father's aunt, who would never say a bad word about anybody or anything, would become a neurotic ball of nerves when I came for a stay. My visits got to the point where I could ONLY sit in the kitchen where she could keep an eye on me OR, when I REALLY needed to use the bathroom, I had to keep the door open when doing my "business". You see, she knew from experience, I would make an EXCUSE to go to the bathroom, when in fact I was going there to rifle through the medicine cabinet or the hamper or the laundry closet to see what was what. I meant no harm. Really. I simply thought of it as a safari into another person's jungle.

As I said, obnox ... uh ... inquisitive.

For some reason, I had a deep fascination with pills. NOT to take them. NOO! Truly that never was on my agenda. On the contrary, I wanted to know what color they were, what size and how many. However, if a pill or two or three accidentally ended up on the floor and were brushed under a baseboard or inadvertently flushed down the toilet, that was just a hazard of the "exploration".

Ooooo, but I remember the day my curiosity really put me in the doghouse.

My mother's father was a devoted volunteer fireman. He was the lifeblood of that fire department ... literally! You see, as a carpenter, he BUILT the building his fire unit was housed in. When the fire alarm went off ... you made sure you got out of his way. His manic scramble to fly out the door was a thing of wonder. In those days, before a firefighter's home was equipped with a CB radio, one had to go to the firehouse in order to find out where the fire was. When he heard the firehouse siren, he became a WILDMAN! More than once, I was almost trampled to death in his mad dash to get out of the house.

Now, as I said, "Pa" (as we called him) was a carpenter. During the Depression, in my mother's formative years, he built their house and a detached garage using the wood from an old chicken coop that was about to be torn down.

The house was a little, white, three bedroom bungalow with a sun room on one end and a side porch on the other. The side porch had a back door with wooden steps descending down to a long stone sidewalk that led to a side door into the garage. The

garage itself was divided into two parts. The main room held a large carpentry workshop filled with all sorts of machinery that could easily remove an appendage or two. On the other side of the building, attached to the shop, was an extra bay where he parked his station wagon. However, you could only access the bay through the shop or by opening the garage door, which he kept locked from the inside.

Well ...

There was this little lock on the side shop door that faced the house that little Stevie was always fascinated with. It was almost like magic to me. In actuality, it was just one of those ordinary doorknob locks where the button in the middle of the knob gets pushed and turned. Voila! The door is locked.

However, the problem with this one was that it didn't pop up; it only turned. If you weren't paying attention, you couldn't really tell when it was unlocked or not. Which, of course, made it even MORE mesmerizing to my little inquiring brain. I was scolded several times by my grandfather "not to touch that lock!". My treasured grandmother also encouraged me to "do what Pa told me".

But, no ... I juuuust couldn't do it. It was a siren song that regularly called out to me ...

"Stebie ... Stebie ... " (My Grammie called me Stebie).

Soooooo ... one day, I was playing with the doorknob, as I wasn't supposed to ... locked, unlocked, locked, unlocked ... when Grammie called me into lunch. The problem was, I had lost track of which position the lock was in. Grammie called again. I got flustered. So I just hoped I situated the lock correctly, closed the door behind me and went into the house to wash my hands.

We had just sat down when the fire alarm went off. My grandfather LEAPT to his feet, knocked a chair out of his way, grabbed his coat and car keys and ran out. The next thing we heard was cursing; a lot of cursing. A REAL lot of cursing. We got up to see what was happening.

Somebody had locked the shop door.

And with the garage doors being locked, Pa couldn't get in ... at all.

I don't think I've ever seen a human being's face turn that color of red.

Then it almost became comical (but, of course, it wasn't ... but it was ...) The situation reminded me of a cartoon where the main character is trying to get into a room and puts their feet on either side of the door jamb and pulls. There was a lot of jumping around and yanking and pounding and running from window to door to door to window.

Finally he ran full force back into the house. I knew it wasn't going to be good for me. Yes, there was hollering and yelling and accusing ... all the time frantically

searching for the garage door key. My Grammie and I just stood there silently with our hands folded in front of us.

No key.

He tore back outside with a hammer and broke a window. Crawling through, he didn't give me a backward glance (glare?).

I took that as a good sign.

My Grammie turned to me and quietly said, "Didn't I say not to play with that lock?" And, with that, we sat back down to finish our lunch.

The next time I went to visit Grammie and Pa, the doorknob lock was gone and there was a key operated deadbolt on the door.

Even so, I still wished I knew how that doorknob lock worked.

Oh well.

I am still a curious adult. Old habits die hard. As a matter of fact, my neighbors Stan and Linda in Tucson have given me the appellation of "Mrs. Kravitz". You know the obnoxious ... curious neighbor from across the street in the old sitcom "Bewitched" who needs to know EVERYTHING of what is going on.

And I carry that epithet with pride!

However, unlike Mrs. Kravitz, when I look out my window and see something out of the ordinary, I don't begin making odd guttural sounds of confusion. Nor do I have the urge to yell, "Abner! Abner!" Through my years of experience, I have learned to remain low-key in the face of my innate snoopiness without being TOO obnoxious. Although, I confess, I do find myself crying out, "Danny! Danny!"

I can't help it if I want to share my discoveries.

Inquisitively yours,
Curious George

Rollin', Rollin', Rollin'

All my life, I've always had this yin/yang relationship with bicycles. I know it sounds odd that I would have such an affiliation with an inanimate object. However, some of the highest highs and most disappointing lows in my life revolved (get it?) around bicycles.

It's hard to say why Gloria and Harry Fate (You know, the Fates?) had such a plan for me with regard to an insentient plaything. I can only speculate that, in a previous life, I must have been a poor father searching post-World War II Rome for my stolen bicycle, without which I would lose the job which was to be the salvation of my young family ... oh, wait ... that's the plot of "The Bicycle Thief", (Vittorio De Sica, 1948).

Silly me!

What I CAN say is there is both a soft spot and a bitter plank in my heart when it comes to bicycles.

MOST recently, it was soft and gooshy.

In 1988, when I first moved to Washington, DC, , I arrived sans car. Even though Washington had (and still has) a great transportation system, I decided I wanted a bicycle to haul my skinny heinie around. But, I was (as one could say) po'. However, one Saturday, while visiting the far-off land of Virginia, across the Potomac River from the City, I came across something called Best Department Store. It was a bargain basement establishment with great, low prices. I couldn't prove if it was "best" with regard to their other commodities, but it DID have the object of my desire... a 26 inch, turquoise blue, brakes on the pedals, no gears, boys bike for the grand total of 25 dollars!!! I cajoled my friend Leon (whom I had just met) to drive me there so I could introduce him to the new love of my life. And, ooooooo, I did LOVE that bike! It was SO me! I also adored it because it would annoy all those spandex suited, 153 gear riding fanatics, as I toddled along on a bike path in front of them, interfering with their muscled up plans.

"Oops! Sorry! Ding, ding!"

(I'm a rebel, baby. A REBEL!!)

I had that bike for YEARS; even taking it with me to Areezoner! I only just gave it up in 2020, when I realized my AGING knees could no longer rotate a gearless bike chain for a prolonged period without something smartin'. At least I donated it to a good charity.

That two-wheeler certainly was a balm to help assuage the psychological trauma I had developed from my two previous bikes.

But in order to get to the source of my love/pained relationship, we have to go ALL the way back to the early years.

As I've coyly mentioned, we didn't have much money in the Cupo coffers. As a result, little Stevie didn't have a bicycle. And, as a result of THAT fact, didn't know how to ride one.

(Please ... no pity!)

When I was about eight ... ish ... the word got out to some not-so-close, but well-meaning relatives of my lack thereof. I found myself being driven across the Mohawk River (which flows through Schenectady, people!) into the neighboring town of Scotia. There, I was to find the new joy of my life on which I could FINALLY learn how to RIDE ... or so I was made to understand.

The poor thing was about 40 years old and was so rusty, you could barely see the blood red paint that was still clinging to it. And it smelled funny; kind-a like car oil when it has run through the pump too many times, for too many miles.

I smiled a weak smile I seemed to use a lot in my youth, said my thank yous and tried to figure out HOW I could learn to ride the thing without any of my friends seeing me.

No dice.

The next summer, between my fourth and fifth year in school, we kids were all excited because we were getting ready to go to the Altamont County Fair! I was particularly agog, because we were going on my BIRTHDAY!

Altamont was a rural county next to the VERY urbane Schenectady County. Because it was strictly rural, they had the BEST county fair in the area! It had everything a kid could hope for; the best rides, the best games, the best food to get sick on and even side shows! Of course, we weren't allowed to actually GO into the side shows. But it was tingulating to imagine what was going on inside of those tents based on what we saw from the lurid paintings on the outside.

Anyway, after the day's blue ribbons had been handed out for the cows and pigs and sheep and chickens ... which, to me, smelled almost as bad as that old bike now sitting in my grandmother's shed ... we kids, our friends and my long suffering mother were ushered into this HUGE grandstand to watch the daily variety show on the outdoor stage. I was a little guy, so, of course, the place looked gigantic to me.

We seated ourselves in the second tier. We were so far up, everyone on stage looked like toys. But we didn't care. We were at The Altamont Fair!

After an afternoon of magic shows and singers and jugglers, it was time to give away the grand prizes of the day: two 26 inch bicycles; a boy's and a girl's. They (No, not the weather people) rolled out a big meshed barrel. Inside were all the ticket stubs collected at the gate from that day. All our tickets had a matching number for each one of those stubs.

The first spin and draw came for the boy's bike. We all anxiously held our breath.
"8346729!"

Not us. We groaned.

Some lucky teen came up on stage, mumbled some words of thanks, then wheeled "our" bike off the stage.

The second drawing for the girl's bike was next. The barrel was spun and the number was read.

It was mine.

I stood up and SCREAMED, "MEEEEEEEEEE!"

Me! The boy whose family didn't have enough money to buy one!

Me! The little kid with a third-hand, funny smelling, rusted bike sitting in his grandmother's shed because he was too humiliated to ride it.

Me! The birthday boy!

ME!

I looked at my mother, and she simply said, "Go on and get it. We'll meet you."

I FLEW down those stairs, pushing my little tiny body between folks much, much larger than I and wiggled, squished and squeezeed my way to the stairs leading up the stage. Somebody double-checked the numbers, then led me up to the microphone. There were a MILLION people looking at me, but, at that moment, I felt like I was the only person on Earth.

The emcee asked me my name and where I was from, but I hardly could get anything out; I was breathless from the run and dizzy from the excitement.

ME!

I LOVED that bicycle from the first moment I laid eyes on it! It was turquoise blue and shone like a summer sky. And, thank goodness it was a girl's bike. Being I was such a tiny fella and the bike had no horizontal crossbar, the only way I could reach the peddles was by standing up. With no bar, I could peddle! Which made it even more meant just for me.

It was all mine! It was my special, prize winning, birthday bicycle! We belonged to each other!

And I finally learned to properly ride on MY bike.

There were "bike hikes" to Auntie Anna's soda fountain for free ice cream cones. There were evenings of bike tag with the whole neighborhood frantically riding around the local elementary school to avoid getting tagged "it". There were long rides into the hills around my house with my best friends, talking about comics, family and stuff.

I couldn't have had those great adventures without MY bike.

Five years of fun passed very quickly.

The summer of my fourteenth birthday, my father's mother's new husband ("Uncle Tony") had a visit from his son, daughter-in-law and grandson from Ohio. They were staying the week. The parents seemed like nice people, but the son was a bad seed. He was a troubled kid.

One day, my sweet Uncle Tony asked me if I would mind letting his grandson ride my bike.

"What? MY biiiike?" My love? My all? My everything??? Even my brothers didn't ride my beloved bike!"

I felt as if my heart was being ripped out of me. But my darling, loving Uncle Tony asked me so nicely, how could I say no.

So I gave him my permission.

The next time I saw my bicycle, it was in a hundred pieces all over the garage, the yard and even in the ditch along our road. The kid had decided to pull it apart; hacking it up and throwing it's parts at birds and squirrels for fun, using them as target practice.

There were ... and are no words.

(I gotta stop for a moment. Some things you just never get over.)

...

A few days went by and, thankfully, the family went back to Ohio. My birthday was coming up, so the adults decided to assuage me by offering to buy me a new bike. The thought of it felt like I was betraying the memory of my most cherished ...

... but ...

... kids are resilient.

I remember actually having the sense to think to myself, "I have to move on from this." So I let them buy me a new bike.

Ohhhhhhh!

It was a Stingray!!! Electric blue, with butterfly handlebars and a white sparkly banana seat! It even had a three gear gearshift on the crossbar in front of the seat! Nothing could replace my first love, but THIS was something I could get used to REAL fast! It was cool. It was groovy. IT WAS GRRRREEEEAT!

I rode that animal almost everyday, except in the winter months ... and even then, I sometimes did.

But the years passed and it was time to go off to college.

Before I left for my freshman year, my parents asked me if my younger brother, Mike, could ride my super cool Stingray while I was gone.

I had a flashback to "that other time" when Uncle Tony had asked me so nicely. I really hesitated. But, then, I maturely thought, "Hey! He's my brother. Nothing's gonna happen."

So I said, "Sure!"

When I came home for my first break ...

... my Stingray was in pieces all over the garage.

Lightning had struck twice.

Even now, these many years later, those two "losses" still affect me. I get a little verklempt. However, I have since come to learn my sweet brother was having his own personal issues at the time. I get it. I can sympathize with the ordeals we all face in childhood. We do what we need to do in order to get by.

But, for the present, I've decided my bicycle days are over. That is, except for my stationary bike. Oh, old habits die hard, you know.

However, there is still one thing I need to get out of my system:

"WHY, MICHAEL? WHYYYYY?"

Me

The family briar patch

Something to think about ...

Looking into ones family tree has become, oh so, popular these days. (Well, what the heck else is there to do while you are in self isolation with your finger firmly stuck up an orafice?)

But even BEFORE this PLAGUE fell upon us, digging up your roots had been slowly becoming a cult. Now, it isn't anywhere near as outlandish as the Moonies or Jim Jones ("WHAT WERE THEY THINKING????"), but it certainly has its rabid devotees. Look at the rise of popularity of T.V. shows like "Who Do You Think You Are?" or "Finding Your Roots". Even my next door neighbor is about to self-publish his FOURTH book on his family. And as fascinating it is for his immediate family, them books ain't gonna reach the New York Times Best-Sellers list.

Oh, listen, I'm not condemning the hobby. I'm not THAT much of a curmudgeon ... yet. ("You damn kids get off my lawn!"). It certainly takes gumption and stick-with-it-ness to peel back the layers (or should I say seeecrets hmmmhhh?) in order to reveal the antics of one's past kinfolk.

Even my darling Danny has been delving into his family's heritage for YEARS. It keeps his brain cells sparking and his hands busy. ("Idle hands ..." and all that). So far he has found (according to my latest inquiry of him) 8,661 people hanging on those branches of his tree. 8,661!!! That ain't no mere tree; that's a Sequoia!!!

Many years ago, he did try to hack his way through my own family's tangled brush. I have to admit, some of the things he found did truly amaze me. Facts, of which, I had NO idea that absolutely made me look at myself differently.

I had always known I was a mutt with the map of Europe tucked in every crevice of my body. ("Ooo, that tickles!") But I thought we'un's were associated with the mainland of Europe; mostly Poland and Italy. As a matter of fact, my last name in Italian means "dark" or "darkness"aaaand my first name means (get ready) "prince". Thaaat's right; you figured it out ... "Prince of Darkness". (When I put that together some years ago, I called my long suffering mother and yelled, "DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU NAMED ME?????" She had no reply.) Danny's name means something like "white angel", so it all evens out somehow ...

ANYWAY ...

Danny discovered that almost all of my mommy's father's family came from Ireland. IRELAND! The land of St. Pat, the wearin' of the green and no snakes! So much for being shackled to mainland Europe!

I should have known something didn't add up by the amount of liquid libation that was shared on many an occasion on my maternal side. NOT that I am reducing an entire ethnicity to a cliché ... but the fact remains that every family gathering could not go by without the adults enjoying a highball or two.

For those of you not in the know, a highball is a cocktail of whiskey or scotch mixed with ginger ale and served in a tall glass containing a lot of ice. My grandfather would continually be pushing the stuff. "Anyone want a highball? How about you, Ruth? You want a highball? Pete? A highball? Whatcha say? Want a highball?"

In my head, I heard myself yelling, "STOP SAYING HIGHBALL!!" But that was probably because I was never offered one.

Danny also found that my long suffering mother's mother's parents weren't born in Poland at ALL, but in the long ago conquered empire of Austria-Hungary. ("What? Now I'm not even Polish???"). I wasn't acquainted with these great grand parents. I only know that after they came over from the "old country", they bought a farm in southern New York State and raised a family of eleven children. They were near towns with names like Pine Island and Florida.

The area is known as "The onion capital of the world". Whenever we went to visit my grandmother's siblings, we knew we were getting close when we got hit with a snootful of "eau de onion". The entire valley was redolent with the smell.

Now ya know.

On the other side of the family, I found out that my poor father's mother wasn't born in the U.S. of A. either!! I always thought she was a native New Yorker, but it turns out, her father came to America from Italy by himself. Once he established a job and a residence, he sent for his oldest son, my great uncle John, to come over ... BY HIMSELF AT FOURTEEN YEARS OLD. Then sent him back at SIXTEEN YEARS OLD to retrieve his sisters, one of whom was my grandmother and returned with the two little girls, who were even YOUNGER than him. Can you imagine? Unbelievable. Danny pieced this together by looking at immigrant records, ship manifests and census records. So, you see ALL kinds of crazy things can be discovered by hard-working, somewhat obsessive home schooled genealogists. (And I thank you my darling Danny.)

Butcha know, I also like the non-factual family lore that is passed down over the years which has absolutely no proof, but is always retold as the "God's honest" truth. Those stories are usually WAY more dramatic, lurid and FUN!

One of my favorites involves a tale on my mother's side. Supposedly, her father's father came to the U.S. of A. through Canada. The story goes that, one night in the late 1800's, he KILLED a man in a bar fight by bludgeoning him to death. He then snuck across the border to allude the Royal Mounted Canadian Police. (Lurid, baby! Lurid!)

Of course, nobody can prove the validity of the story, but it IS tinglatin' to even suspect that I could have the blood of a murderer flowin' through my veins.

So, be careful what you look for when diggin' up the past. A Pandora's Box could be waiting for you.

Watch out! The Prince of Darkness may yet rise!

Sweetly and lovingly yours, with flowers and daisies and smooches and hugs,
Pookie-pie

There's No Business ...

So SPEAKING of genetics ...

I have show business in my blood!

I have ALWAYS wanted to say that. However, I imagined it would come out like Tallulah Bankhead, with a hysterical laugh at the end: "I have show business in my blood, DAHling. UHHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!" (I know ... not the same.)

I realize "show business" is different than "drama", which, I confess to have a tendency to indulge in ... BUT that might also be an inherited trait, so it's not my fault.

My immediate family is (was) all singers (except for my baby brother ... whose inability to match a pitch is only outweighed by his love of music.) . Singing is what put me on stage. First as a boy soprano. I recall my long suffering mother dragging my older brother, John, and I around to afternoon teas and such to sing duets while she played piano. I have this image in my mind of being in a sunroom with a bunch of ladies in matching hats and gloves, sipping tea and smiling politely.

Although I may be mixing up that image with a scene from "The Manchurian Candidate" where a bunch of captured g.i.'s have been brainwashed into thinking they are at a tea party with a bunch of polite old ladies, but are actually in a room full of grim looking Chinese military men. As a test of the insidious technique, one g.i. is coaxed to shoot another one in the head.

But you know, now that I think of it, I don't recall seeing anybody getting shot in the head while we were singing, so maybe I haven't mixed up the images after all.

I actually made some bucks as a kid, singing for weddings and special occasions. I was a teeny child, so they (no not the weather people) usually propped me up on a chair or a box or something life threatening in order to watch me sing. In addition, I sang soprano in church choir A LOT! Another boy soprano, named Hayward, and I would always be stuck in the front row because we were so small. Thank goodness the railing in the choir loft was covered by fabric so we couldn't be seen playing endless games of hangman during the sermon.

(As an adult, Hayward once got carted off to jail for shooting his son. Thankfully, it wasn't fatal. I wonder if Hayward thought he was in "The Manchurian Candidate"?)

But I really do think "da show biz" is in the blood, especially on my poor father's side.

My dad's dad was a barber/hairdresser by trade. He also played mandolin and sang. In the 1920's, he was part of a plectrum orchestra in Schenectady.

(THERE'S a phrase you don't hear anymore. A plectrum orchestra was a band made up of instruments that could be strummed or plucked. It usually consisted of guitars, mandolins, banjos and sometimes a harp).

Daddy Joe (as we called him) was also an innovator. He had a small combo which played on the radio every day for 15 minutes. I say "innovator" because, at that time, there was hardly NO radio AT ALL; only 4 stations in the U.S. of A. Schenectady had WGY because its General Electric plant was helping to develop the new contraption. He was friends with my grandmother's brother, John (of cross-Atlantic antics). John brought my grandmother, Mary, to the station one day to listen. One thing led to another and she ended up singing on his show ... which led to another thing ... and another ... and ... well ... here I am!!!

(If anybody out there is paying attention and hasn't dropped off yet, my grandparents' names were Mary and Joseph ... said the prince of darkness ...)

The show biz line continued with Mary's youngest brother, Mike Boscia. Mike ended up being one of the primary Press Reps for CBS radio in the 1930's through the 1950's. He represented (and became very friendly with) Kate Smith and Arthur Godfrey. Arthur Godfrey was a godsend to Mike's family. Mike passed from a brain tumor in 1954. Mike had 9 children. Arthur Godfrey picked up the mantle for that family and supported them until the day Mr. Godfrey died. Before he passed, one of Mike's daughters ended up working for him. As a result, I have a personally autographed picture of Arthur Godfrey which says, "To Stevie Cupo. Best wishes! Arthur Godfrey". (... Don't be jealous ...).

My last proof of my innate connection to the world of glamour and ego returns to my grandmother, Mary. Mary's youngest sister, who everyone called Minnie, married a fella whose last name was Philbin. And, yes, as many (most) of you already know, Regis Philbin was my cousin. ("Oh lord, he's trotting that old thang out again!") He actually was my father's first cousin.

Now don't get TOO excited (all that restless stirring is excitement, right?), I NEVER met him. My poor dad remembers him when they were teens. However, as these things happen in most Italian families, there was some kind-a rift around the time my great grandfather died and one side of the family stopped talking with the other side. So Regis' parents packed him up and they all moved to California, never to be seen again ... except on MILLIONS of TV sets across the country.

Now that I think of it, I suppose I will never have the chance for a tearful reunion since he has passed.

That is, unless I decide to begin digging up dead celebrities as a fun distraction. You know, as the infamous prince of darkness, I am allowed whatever ghoulish pastime

I choose. Of course, with my notoriety, if you want to get MY autograph, there will be the obligatory exchange for your soul. It's a small price to pay for a piece of my illustrious birthright, wouldn't you say?

Glamorously yours,
Count Fabula

Famous People I Have Met (Part 1)

So now that I have you all oogly-googly with this celebrity talk of Regis Philbin and Arthur Godfrey, I am drawn to think of the famous folk I have encountered. I've actually been thinking of this because of something that was being passed around of late on Facebook (that damn Facebook).

As some of you web-bers know, all KINDS of nutty challenges/quizzes/surveys get posted on FB. Often, they have questions posed that are WAY too personal in nature, which so many of us are ALL too happy to answer. Eventually, we come to the conclusion that it probably wasn't the greatest thing to participate in. ("What was I thinking??!?!")

Anyway, this "thread" asked readers to list nine famous people who they have met ... but, then, add a tenth name of someone who hadn't ever crossed their paths, nor ever cared to. Of course, guessing the "fake" was futile because who else but the writer would know of their most intimate encounters or embarrassing moments? (Oh ... if it's like my circle of friends ... everybody.) Well ... DESPITE this, it's still hard to guess the answer ... am I right??

With that in mind, here are three (not nine ... sheesh ... overkill) celebs I was introduced to with whom I actually had an adult conversation. I've chosen three that even I can't believe I met. These are my impressions (judgments) in the brief time I spent in their company. I selected them because they have all since gone on to that great gossip rag in the sky and are no longer around to corroborate my claim. (These all occurred between 1978 and 1985. while I was still living in Manhattan, Noo Yawk Big Apple).

- Claudette Colbert -

In the mid-eighties, a friend of mine with whom I had done a show a few years earlier and was an excellent tap-dancer, was cast in the Lincoln Center revival of "Anything Goes", starring Patti LuPone (who I also met, but she is still alive). Afterward, as I was waiting near the stage door for him to come out, another friend of mine (whom I shall coyishly refer to, for any relatives reading this, as a former "swain") approached. On his arm was none other than Claudette Colbert. He had met her years ago at some soirée. They hit it off and, ever since, he acted as her escort whenever she came into town. At the time of our meeting, she was in her early eighties. My first impression was how gorgeous she still was ... even staring at her inches from her face. There was no

evidence of any “procedures” and she wore light makeup, albeit with her drawn eyebrows and subtle false eye lashes. Of course, she had her signature hair bangs and had put on some pounds on her small frame since her early years, but she looked GAW-geous in a gray-blue chiffon and silk gown. I remember she was incredibly gracious without being assertive. She struck me as, what Humphrey Bogart called in pictures, “a classy dame”. We spoke of the show we all had just seen and of the weather at her home (she was living in Barbados) compared to New York City. She offered conversation while, as I could tell, staying careful with the amount of information she wanted to impart. Very polite, without guile. I never felt snubbed, but could tell that she was utilizing her years of experience of meeting with strangers.

Overall impression: Lovely inside and out.

- Erte -

(I have trouble believing this one, myself!)

In 1978, one of my early jobs in NYC was working at a used clothing store in the East Village. My job was to fold (and refold and refold) the piles of jeans people had pulled apart. I befriended a great guy named Hoyt, with whom I had an early (albeit, short-lived) friendship. If my memory serves me (HAH!), Hoyt’s significant other (Richard) worked as an international trader of art goods, mostly for interior decorators. It was Richard who was given an opening night invitation (and guest) to a retrospective of Erte’s work at a chi-chi Soho art gallery. Maestro Erte himself was going to attend!

Well, Richard had to be out of the country for his work, so he gave the invitation to Hoyt, who turned around and asked me to be his “and guest”. (!!!!!!!) It was a formal affair, so Richard, who was “petite” like me, let me borrow his tuxedo.

Off Hoyt and I went.

When I was introduced to Maestro Erte, the first thing that overwhelmed me was his crystal blue eyes; bright, light sky blue. They were mesmerizing. Another thing that struck me was how TINY he was. I am no titan, but he barely came up to my shoulder. He was in his late eighties, and in spite of the brightness of his eyes, did appear frail and showed his age. He wore a tuxedo made of black velvet and wore a very stylish white silk scarf. He also was a bit hard of hearing, so, because of the ambient sound of the gathering, one had to speak almost directly into his ear. He had a very slight accent; sort of a cross between Russian and French. He had a very sweet, sweet demeanor and was incredibly gentle in his manner. I confess, I don’t really remember what we spoke about ... probably because I was so gaga about meeting him. However, thinking about it, I am left with the impression there was no artifice AT ALL. He had an old-world gentlemanly aura.

Overall impression: Friendly and refined.

- Yul Brynner -

In the late Seventies, I was working the Telecharge phones on Broadway, selling tickets for the show "Grease". The company manager of the show used to like to come into our phone room during the show to eat our snacks. (Hmph!). Eddie (said moocher) was also the company manager for the revival of "The King and I", starring (you guessed it) Yul Brynner. Eddie and I got talking one night with him telling me that "Mr. Brynner's" personal dresser had just quit. Apparently "Mr Brynner" was a very difficult person to work for and they (no, not the weather people) couldn't get anybody in the Costume Union to agree to work as his dresser.

Eddie asked, "did I know anyone" with experience who could be considered for a replacement. Well, costuming was what I did in college, so I told him I had some experience.

The next thing I knew, I was standing backstage at the Marquis Theatre, waiting to enter "Mr. Brynner's" dressing room. Meeting me, the "almost outta there" dresser, cynically gave me the once over and sighed. He asked me why I wanted the job, then, before I could give a full answer, went into a controlled rant of "Mr. Brynner's" expectations, which also included some not-so flattering antics of "Mr. Brynner". It was then, I got thinking to myself, "WHAT was I getting myself into???"

Soon I was ushered into "Mr. Brynner's" anteroom. It was completely draped in fabric. You couldn't see the ceiling, walls NOR floor. I felt like I had walked into "One Thousand and One Nights" and, any minute, the Genie was going to pop out of the oil lamp that was ACTUALLY sitting on a table to my right. There was nothing to sit on except cushions that were placed around the edge of the room.

I stood, alone, for about 20 minutes before the cheerless dresser came back, telling me, "Mr. Brynner' is ready to see you now". Behind a break in two of the fabric panels was a door that, apparently, led to the inner sanctum. I walked through it.

What greeted me was theatre, pure theatre.

"Mr. Brynner" was seated with his back to me at a dressing room table and mirror that went the entire length of the room. The entire table was positioned on a double tiered platform, also spanning the length of the room. The chair he was seated in had a distinct throne-like design. The entire room was also draped in fabric as was the anteroom. It was then I was introduced to him as a possible replacement for the position of his dresser.

"Mr. Brynner" spied me in his mirror (that is EXACTLY what he did ... he "spied" me). He paused and grandly (that's the best word I can use) "grandly" stood, then turned

to face me. Because he was up on that stupid platform, I had to look up to talk to him. He did take one step down to shake my hand, but then backed up to the top level, so that he always remained in a higher position than me. He was polite in a weirdly stiff manner. He asked me questions of my experience and let me ramble a bit. Yes, it was a job interview and, no, wasn't an intimate conversation. But the whole time, I couldn't help but feel I was talking to a character ... the King of Siam ... and not a real human being. The whole experience just felt very odd and staged.

Overall impression: formal and fake.

(As a sidebar, I did NOT get the job. He hired a professional "gentlemen's gentleman from England. THANK GOODNESS ... from what I have heard about him, he would have sucked my soul out through my eyeballs.)

Anyway, enough!

I was thrilled to meet all of these people. However, in my old age, I've come to realize, in spite of their fame, they were all plain human beans, just like any of us ... but with a little more cache.

And, who knows, when I, once again, write of noted personalities, I just might be writing about one of YOU people. So, all I will say is, watch yourselves because I will be watching you.

Infamously yours,
Hedda Cupo

... Like No Business I Know

Howzabout Unca Steven telling you a few the-A-ter stories? Ya'd figure after a lifetime of trampling and squashing the "boards", I might have one or two tangled tales up my costumed sleeves. A couple of them are from my deep, twisted past. But one is apocryphal ... or for the unedumacated out there ... it may or may not be true ... but it is still one of my VERY favorite stories from the stage. And aren't stories with a dicey veracity the best ones anyway?

This first anecdote comes from a performance I did in early 1983 at Naples Dinner Theatre in Florida. I was playing a character named Charlie Davenport in "Annie Get Your Gun". Charlie is a promoter and part time con man who also is the "barker" for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. He opens the musical, singing out to the crowds to entice them into coming to the Show. It's a "call and answer" number where Charlie asks the throngs, who was it that did a bunch of great feats they all supposedly know about. The crowd replies "Who?". Charlie sings "Colonel Buff'lo Bill!"

Now, there is a thing that sometimes happens to a performer. When you memorize lines or lyrics, the information is stored in the "this MUST stay fresh in my head" part of your brain. However, after a prolonged run, that information is moved into the "ahhh, it's in there, I've got this" lobe. Unfortunately, if, at some point, you suddenly try to utilize the "fresh" part of your brain, there ain't nuttin' there. And when you desperately attempt to retrieve it from the automatic side, it says, "Tough! You should've come to us in the first place."

So! I was standing on a dais placed center stage with the chorus all around me. The actors' and audience's focus was all on Charlie (me, me, me!). As I was singing my second verse, I completely "went up"! (Remember? "Going up" means you forget your words? Or did you just go up?) Not only did I forget the lyrics, I couldn't recall a single word from the English language. I ended spitting out something like, "oo ... eee ... da ... to ... be!" (You see, if you do something loudly and brazenly, no one will ever know you have just made a total jerk of yourself ...!)

Now remember, this chorus had to reply to my Cro-magnon grunts with a bombastic "Who?". However, what came out sounded like a bunch of sickly owls in an earthquake: "hoo-oo-oo-hoo-uh!". It was more vibration than anything. Then, of course, I had to reply to them with my, "Colonel Buff'lo Bill!" Professional that I was, the audience heard a confident "BWAH-HAH-HAH-BILL!!".

Didn't live that one down for a long time.

My second adventure dives even farther back in time. We are now in the year of 1976 at Surfflight Summer Theatre in Beach Haven, New Jersey. It was a crazy season of

fifteen shows in sixteen weeks! We performed the current show at night, while rehearsing the next week's show during the day. It was NUTS! But, boy, did it enlarge your resume FAST, not to mention increasing your ability to think on your feet ... well ... in some cases.

We were doing "Oklahoma", which was only the second show of the season. At the end of the musical, (spoiler alert ... uh huh) there is a trial where the town is watching the proceedings in which the authorities decide whether or not the hero, Curly, killed the bad guy, Judd. Everybody in the town loves Curly and know he could never do such a thing. The trial is pushed along faster than it should and Curly is on the verge of being declared not guilty. The Sheriff, however, is upset at this and yells that it is improper. The heroine's aunt, Eller, yells at the Sheriff and tells him to hush up or else she would tell his wife he was running around with another woman. The Sheriff yells that he isn't running around. And Aunt Eller replies, "Well hush up or I'll tell her that you are!"

Now, because the same group of actors did not change all summer, the directors that came in for each show had to pick from the talent that was at hand. Sometimes the casting wasn't always the best fit. In this case, Aunt Eller was played by an opera diva without much "stage" experience. And the Sheriff was a rather ... shall we say ... effete chorus boy without much dialogue training.

Came time for the trial and things were going along as normal. The Sheriff protested and Aunt Eller chastised him. However, this particular night, she emphatically said, "Oh hush up! Or I will tell your wife you are going around with another MAN!"

Silence.

He, then, shrieked, "ANOTHER MAN?", bent over ... and backed all the way upstage, exhaling a "WHA-HA-HA-AT??!?!?!" He then proceeded to grab onto a porch railing set piece for support and just SCREAMED with laughter.

You know when you throw a stone in a pond and there is that initial "plunk" followed by subsequent ripples? Well, that's what happened. Those of us who were standing closet to where the scene had taken place, lost it. Followed by the chorus standing just outside center stage. Followed by the rest of the cast on the periphery. Followed by the audience.

Bedlam.

The Sheriff crawled off stage. Aunt Eller had her face buried in my armpit. The audience was berserk ... and I had the next line!!!!

I'm not sure we finished the show that night.

The last tale is NOT mine, but I just HAVE to share it with you.

The story goes like this:

A theatre was doing “Carousel”. The big number from the show is “You’ll Never Walk Alone”, which is reprised at the end as a finale.

The director had decided he wanted one hundred white doves to fly out over the audience at the end of the number, closing the show. They couldn’t find white doves, but were able to procure a bunch of white (or white-ish) pigeons. The caveat was they couldn’t get them until just before the opening night of the show. Well, come dress rehearsal, the pigeons had still not arrived. Fortunately, all their cages had been jerry-rigged into the rafters between the lights, so they were still able to practice the opening of the cages on cue, albeit, without the birds.

Opening night and the pigeons arrived! They were placed in their cages and hauled up to their positions above the stage.

Apparently, the show was wonderful, with an enthusiastic audience and lots of applause. It was now time for the “piece de resistance”. The climax came: “YOU’LL NEVER WALK ...” The cue was given to open the cages ...

Then ... plop ... plop ... plopplopplopplop! The cast was bombarded with the bodies of one hundred dead pigeons!!

THE BIRDS HAD SUFFOCATED TO DEATH AMONG THE LIGHTS!

And that ... my friends ... is whatcha call musical comedy.

So, while I think of how to create more drama in my life, I will take my bow and fade off stage right.

And remember, there IS no business like show business ... I made that up.

Steven Barrymore

What just happened? (Part 1)

Talkin' about theatre stories and death set me to a-thinkin' about my own true-life-I-know-you-won't-believe-me-but-get-over-it-because-they-really-happened-and-I-am-not-making-this-s***-up experiences.

Admit it, at one time or another, in our mundane lives, sometimes something occurs that make you say, "uhhh ... what just happened?" That sudden disappearance of your keys which turn up in another room ... (aaaand, I admit, could just be the beginnings of your downward slide into complete dementia). Or the voice in the dark you SWEAR you heard, but chalk it up to those years of illegal drugs finally taking their toll on what remains of your poor burnt out brain. (Oooooeooooo!) But most of the time, you cynics and doubters just shrug your skeptical shoulders and move on with your boring, uneventful, unbearably repetitive lives, ignoring the possibility that something REALLY special and out of the ordinary had just happened.

Now, those lucky us'un's who are sensitive (don't say it ... "gullible" ...) to non-hallucinogenic experiences are fortunate not to have a knee-jerk reaction and "pooh-pooh" or "scoff-scoff" an event that may actually open our consciousnessii (plural of consciousness ... I made it up ... UNLIKE the following tales) to something other than what we perceive around us in our daily slog through life.

Actually, I have had SEVERAL experiences throughout my life; some more significant than others. I have decided to parse them out to you little by little. You see, I'm afraid that if I lay them out all at once, the angry mob of torch carrying peasants will drive me into the windmill and burn me alive. (No wait, that was the plot of "Frankenstein".)

Anyway, I will begin by saying I believe it goes back to genetics ("AGAIN, we're talking about genetics!").

My long suffering mother had this unusual ability to know when someone in the family was going to pass away. All her life, she said, she would suddenly hear someone clearly call out her name, "Ruth!"; it didn't matter where she was or what time of day. When that occurred, somebody in the family would die within two weeks; ALWAYS! She told me her story when I was quite young. I suppose she did it to have another witness in order to prove to herself she wasn't going loony-tunes. Thus, when I got older, I began telling friends of mine to prove I wasn't going loony-tunes and so that there would be additional witnesses outside of the family who would backup the claim. (There might even be some of you reading this who vaguely remember this ... that is, if the dementia or illegal drugs haven't gotten to you first).

Now, I don't claim to have inherited this particular ability from my maternal side. But and however, there seem to have been circumstances in my small existence which make me do a double-take or two (... which, I suppose, would be a quadruple-take). Let's begin by my re-telling of my first theatre ghost, shall we? (Get your flashlights and spooky campfire tales ready).

In 1984, (long before you were born), I was hired by Circa '21 Dinner Theatre in Rock Island, Illinois to do a new show about George M. Cohan. (You unfamiliar the-A-ter people ... look him up). I was to play Cohan. (You KNOW I just HAD to throw that in, didn't you?).

Circa '21 got its name from the year it was built. It had been constructed and designed as a high-end vaudeville house and movie theatre. It had a very high proscenium (front of stage arch, people!) and a balcony. After falling on hard times, it was purchased and restored to its art deco gloriousness. The big difference, however, was that the seats on the first level had been taken out and platforms built to accommodate dining tables and chairs. The balcony remained as it was, with all the theatre seats intact.

We had been running the show for a week when the management decided to fire the actress playing my mother because she couldn't keep up with the tap dancing we were required to perform. They immediately hired a new actress, using our day and a half we would normally have off between weeks to "put her" into the show. That first day after the weekend, we were going on with the performance. However we were still rehearsing.

I remember it was about three in the afternoon and we were going through her costume changes in real time. I had just danced a big number which took me up several stairways and platforms so that I was almost at the same height of the balcony. Just as I was ending the song, I heard a whole bunch of whining and complaining and general unpleasantness. She was having trouble with her costume and had a "baby fit". (Side bar - can you say DIVA? I wish they had kept the other actress).

Anyway, they stopped rehearsal while they (no, not the weather people) tried to assuage her and fix the problem. So I just sat down where I was on that top platform. I just bided my time and looked around. I saw the chorus people mingling around on the stage. I also saw the waiters and waitresses setting up their stations for that evening's performance. Then I looked across from me into the balcony and I saw one of the waiters (Bill) sitting in the front row. I looked back down into the lower level and was surprised to see Bill setting up his station. So I looked back up to the man in the balcony to try to figure out who he was. He had the same coloring and mustache as Bill ... BUT ...

As I was staring and squinting, trying to figure out who he was, he completely faded away! It was like something out of movie. All I ended up looking at was an empty chair!

And I quote myself, "What just happened?"

He looked as vivid as any actual human being. He was a man in his thirties. He had black, thinning hair and a black mustache. He was wearing blue coveralls; the kind a janitor would wear. He wasn't looking at me. He was staring at the fit our diva was throwing on stage.

And then he was gone.

NO I didn't tell anyone ... at first. My thought was not that they would think I was crazy. My thought was that they would think I was looking for attention (one diva is enough, thank you).

However, a couple of weeks after the "incident", Halloween was coming up. So I thought I would take advantage of the occasion and innocently ask the stage manager (who had been there for years), "Are there any ghosts in this theatre?". I don't know if it was the look on my face, but she immediately said, "Why? What did you see?" (I guess I wasn't that innocent). I blurted out the story I had been holding in "forever". She replied, "Yep. That's him!" My jaw dropped. I swear had heard NOTHING about any weirdness up until that moment.

She related to me this account.

Back when the theatre was built, there was a lot of immigration into that area, particularly folks from Portugal. The theatre needed staff, so they hired some Portuguese men to clean and maintain the new building.

The theatre had a primitive form of air conditioning, which was cutting edge technology for its time. There was a huge vat in the back that was filled with water. When it was heated to a boil, one would pour ammonia into the vat. Apparently, when ammonia evaporates, the gas it creates is cold. That cold gas was, then, blown through pipes throughout the theatre.

Well, one new hiree had difficulty with the English language and misunderstood what was to be done. He tried to boil the ammonia instead of water and blew up the vat, taking the back of the building and his head with it. (Graphic, yes? Well, there HAS to be SOME gore with a ghost story, doesn't there???)

She told me, ever since then, he haunted the building. He was mischievous by doing such things as turning lights on and off and tangling light cables that had already been coiled. He rarely appeared, but if he did, it was in the **BALCONY IN TIMES OF DISTRESS!**

And there you have it. I know you don't believe me. But I ain't lyin'. Truly, truly I am not. THAT is what I experienced and THAT is the subsequent story I was told.

But in case you still have the need to feel superior, scoff at me and generally humiliate me in front of my peers, remember, my time on this Earth will only be for another twenty or thirty years. After I'm gone, I can easily find where most of you live. SO ... if your keys disappear or you wake up with someone yelling "BITCH!" in your ear, you'll know it is me reminding you that things aren't always as they seem to be. AND the phantasmagoric "life" is waiting for YOU as well!

Until we meet again ... (mwah hah haaaah!)

Marley's ghost

Fussin'

I hate to be teased. Hate it. Hate it. Hate it. (Ohhhh “hate” [sic] is such an ugly word.) But, as Forrest Gump said, “Hate is as hate does.” (That’s how the quote goes, right?)

I know the term “hate” is being thrown around a lot these days ... and for good reason; lots of injustice and nasty people doing their best in the name of that word. However, right now, I am only addressing the notion of an extreme personal dislike of mine ... not that I like the concept of “hate” ... but that is a WAY darker place than I want to travel to right now ... ya know?

Anyway, I hate to be teased. Peoples who know me well (like my long-suffering, darling Danny) will attest to my hackles raising in the presence of a derisive comment at my expense. Just HATE it.

It’s almost pathological. I’m not sure why, but it goes very deep. Maybe it’s genetic. My long suffering mother hated to be teased as well. But the difference between she and I (beside our sex, age and ability to do crossword puzzles), is that mommy had a hair-trigger temper. One did not never no uh-uh no way want to say the teeniest wrong thing to her. Yikes! She was smart and tough and knew how to use her wits as a weapon. And it happened FAST. Sometimes it would be long over before you realized you had been eviscerated. Anyway, when she was needled, she got “volcano” mad.

Me? I get snippy and suffer hurt feelings. It cuts my quick, ya know? Hate it.

Or maybe I dislike it so because I was really bullied in junior high and early high school. (Not complainin’ too much here, just stating the facts, ma’am, just the facts).

Although, these days, I do try to create better living through psychological scars ... but I digress.

I was the smallest and most effete boy in my class. Heck, I only weighed 100 pounds when I GRADUATED high school. And I realize, I did have that HUGE “Kick me” notice etched in neon across my forehead. Thankfully, I did learn to tippy-toe around the land mines as much as I could, but every once in a while, one would explode under my butt.

There were two particular tormentors who made my pubescent life crappy: yes, I’m talking to you, Donald MacCallum and David Rybii. Troubled youths, no doubt, but did they have to take it out on me???

However, looking back on this, I’ve discovered that life has a funny way of making limoncello out of lemons; a whole LOT of limoncello.

Tenth grade English class was always a tough one for me. Not that English was a difficult subject, but because the aforementioned, Donald MacCallum used to wait for

me every day outside the classroom door in order to do some insidious deed to me; books on the floor, papers scattered, a punch on the arm ... something.

Well, now a pause to give you some exposition for the remaining part of my tale. Jumping back to the previous year, our school hired a new theatre teacher (who also happened to be the special ed teacher ... makes a lot of sense when you think about it). He wanted to establish a drama club, so he began by having an annual musical. I could sing, so I tried out that first year and got in! (Randolph McAfee in "Bye Bye Byrdie"). It was fun and nobody beat me up! YAY! So when my sophomore year rolled around, I was determined to get cast again. This time it was "Li'l Abner". Well, wouldn't ya know, I got the role of Pappy Yokum. (That won't mean anything to you non-the-A-ter folks, but it was a good role).

We did three performances over the weekend and we were done. Monday afternoon, I was walking toward my English classroom, and, there, per usual, was Donald MacCallum waiting for me. I put my head down and tried to squeeze past him, but he stopped me. So I thought, "Okay, here we go", expecting to get bludgeoned. Instead, he stuck his hand out and, vigorously shook mine, saying, "You made me laugh harder than I ever have in my entire life!"

(I have to take a moment to tell you all, I still get tears in my eyes retelling this story ...)

In that moment, the person who had been my worst enemy, the cause of my worst anxieties, put me on the path that would become my life's work and source of greatest happiness and fulfillment. One little gesture, outside a classroom at Schalmont High School in small town Schenectady, NY, became a life-changing event. Besides the fact that this was the real spark that caused me to choose the stage as my livelihood, to this day, I know I was given this amazing gift of seeing the potential for good in ANY situation; especially the bad.

But, I wanna tell ya, I don't look at myself as blindly optimistic. I have WAY too much wariness inside me to be that naive. No, I simply mean that I CHOOSE to look beyond a bad situation, knowing that there just might be a glass of cool, homemade limoncello waiting for me on the other side.

But ... I still HATE being teased.

Don't try it.

Crankily, but optimistically yours,
Pollyanna Scrooge

Fighting back

So I have a confession to make. I am not always the sweet guy some people think I am. Oh, I TRY to be nice and good and caring ... in fact I strive for it. But, to tell you the truth, as I have already stated ... I am a rebel.

Now before you get the mental image of me dressed all in leather, riding on some Harley "hog", chewing tobacco and downing beers (... as MUCH as I LIKE that conjured fantasy), my insubordination is more of an insidious type of a rebellion that often gets me (a) in trouble or (b) in a lot of pain.

It's not that I disdain authority. No. I have a healthy amount of respect for people who are earnest about keeping order and are honest with the "tools" they are given to keep things running smoothly. My rebellious nature is the kind who gives the side-eye to anyone who thinks they know better than me and want to bend me to their way of thinking. My suspicious side makes it difficult for YOU to get the "thing" done the way YOU want it to be done. I'm a "don't-tell-me-what-to-do-I-can-figure-it-out-on-my-own-damn-it!" kind-a fella. A rebel.

But, as I said, there is pain involved.

I was that kid who was told not to put their tongue to anything metal while outside in the middle of winter ... and then ended up in agony at the bottom of a hill with my tongue stuck to the rail of my sled.

Or then there was the time when I was about 6 years old when my poor father told me not to touch a dry cleaning bag he had laid over a kitchen chair for some future use:

Dad: "This bag is dangerous. Don't touch it. You can suffocate. You won't touch it will you?"

Me: "No, daddy. I won't touch it."

Dad: "You understand it can be dangerous if you put it over your head."

Me: "No, daddy. I won't touch it."

Dad: "You promise you won't touch it."

Me: "I promise, daddy. I won't touch it."

The SECOND he walked out of that room I grabbed the thing and put it over my head! My choking gasps as I was suffocating to death brought him screaming back into the room.

"DIDN'T I TELL YOU NOT TO TOUCH IT?!?!!"

... pause ...

...

The thing about being a closet rebel is that it also cultivates any tendency one has toward procrastination. If one doesn't see the use or reason or logic or interest for any task assigned to said rebel, one can easily put the deed off over days and days and days ... and daaaaays. That's where the "trouble" part comes in. And sometimes "trouble" and "pain" end up occurring in the same scenario.

In 9th grade, I was assigned to do a report on clouds. Much to my chagrin, I had NO interest what-so-ever in writing a technical essay on the tedious facets of clouds. Okay, visualizing the dragons and castles a cloud could become to a beholder held so much more appeal than the sterile "visible mass of water particles suspended at a height in the air". When it came time to write the bloody thing, I simply didn't care! For evenings on end, I would sit in my darkened bedroom at my makeshift desk, singing to myself ... or skimming a comic book ... or actually sketching a cloud or two. Or I just sat staring at my cold assignment, listening to my family below and the distorted sounds of our humming t.v. set echoing up the long, steep narrow stairway.

After a week of this, my hated task was to be turned in the following day and I still hadn't actually WRITTEN anything! It was then the rebel in me made a calm decision.

I carefully picked up a large encyclopedia dictionary, walked to the top of the stairs and willed myself to fall, face-first, down the flight.

Alright, alright, alright ... I wasn't hurt badly ... a sprained wrist which PREVENTED ME FROM WRITING MY REPORT. And, believe me, looking back on it, I KNOW it was stupid, stupid, stupid. And I'm not proud to tell of the extreme deviousness of this. I feel shame for deceiving the ones who love me. And look, I would never think of doing a thing as nuts as this in my adulthood.

HOWEVER, my point is this: I would willingly risk breaking my neck (figuratively speaking) rather than be a part of something that has no worth to me. If I perceive anything to be inane, I will react against it. Not as EXTREME as my prepubescent self did (duh!), but, as an adult, I will still rebel.

Show me something's true value and I will follow through wholeheartedly. But, you must give me a reason that appeals to my artist's soul.

Otherwise, I'd rather look at clouds.

"He's a rebel and I love him so..."

Marlon

Revenge ain't sweet

I hit an old lady. But that was because she hit me first.

Alfred Hitchcock always said you build suspense by informing people of a “bomb under a table”. It gives them fifteen minutes of suspense rather than fifteen seconds of surprise from a sudden explosion. So I am giving away the climax of my story in order to create apprehension.

Do you now feel apprehensive? No? Well ... I sure do!

As difficult it is to believe, it's not always a good thing to admit you whacked an old lady. Now, if it was some onerous burglar sneaking into your home, smacking them down with a tennis racket or your Aunt Gertie's lamp isn't considered a social faux pas. However, when a deed of violence involves an older personage, there seems to be a bit of a pushback in the minds of some people. (Go figure!)

Ahem.

When I moved to DC in 1988, the second job I procured was box office manager of THE Ford's Theatre. (No, I never saw Lincoln's ghost.) I ended up working there for eight years, even while I was doing shows at night at other theatres.

Before Ford's Theatre was “renovated and reworked” in the early 2000's, the box office was in a separate building, next door to the theatre. It was situated on the site of the old Star Saloon, where, apparently, John Wilkes Booth had a couple of snorts to brace himself before he did the deed which led to his infamy.

Having the box office in a separate building had its own set of bugaboos. Patrons had to go up two steps and shove the heavy door from the original building open in order to get their tickets. Then, with all their might, they had to yank the door open to get out of the premises in order to get into the joint next door. It was even trickier if you were trying to run a business. It wasn't exactly an expedient procedure. If the box manager (me) had to speak to the house manager, Joe, about a problem or a mixup (which happened OH so rarely ... uh huh ...) and Joe wasn't in his office because he was dealing with his own mess in the theatre, the box office manager (me) had to leave said box office and do his own yanking and door manipulation in order to walk over to said theatre to talk to the house manager, Joe, about the problem or mixup. (Inhale, exhale).

SO! On this one matinee performance of who remembers what show it was, we had a zillion schools and church groups cramming themselves up the cement steps to get into the main theatre. Most already had their tickets. It was “simply” a matter of course to make the sprint into the theatre. But matinees were ALWAYS a madhouse! When you have that many restless kids who have just travelled from Cucamonga by

school bus explode out through the bus doors to try to squish themselves into the theatre, nerves got a little frayed ... okay?

Well, that show, there was that (rare ... uh huh) problem with some non-school or church patron's tickets. I couldn't get Joe on the phone, so I had to do the yanking and walking to walk over to speak to him directly.

The stairs to the theatre were already mashed with people. So I "scused me and pardoned me" through the throng to try to get to my destination. Well, as I was squeegee-ing my way up to the open doors, I suddenly felt a sharp WHACK between my shoulder blades. I whirled around in shock and pain to see an old lady who was arm-in-arm with an even oolder man. She yelled, "YOU ARE GETTIN' IN THE WAY OF MY FATHER!!!" I was so stunned, I just mumbled a feeble "sorry" and turned around as fast as I could to get away from the harridan to get to the business at hand. I soon reached the door where, thankfully Joe was standing, tearing tickets. I told him whatever it was I needed to tell him and turned to go back down the stairs.

Well, ya see ... that old lady and her even oolder father were still working their way up the steps. When I passed them ... uh ... I just couldn't stop myself ... I wound up and smacked her between the shoulder blades and RAN!!!!

(Such a clever boy. So gentle. So loving ...)

When I slammed the inner door to the box office, I breathlessly confessed to my staff what had just occurred. They laughed at me and berated me and reminded me that that probably wasn't the most civilized thing I could have done.

Just as I sat down at my desk (which was in a separate room from the ticket windows) still overwhelmed, I heard that familiar screeching voice from the steps, now at the ticket window, demanding, "WHAT SCHOOLS ARE HERE TODAY???"

Maturely, I dove under my desk.

I heard co-worker, Marie, at the ticket bay say as innocently as she could, "What do you need ma'am?"

"I WANT TO KNOW WHAT SCHOOLS ARE HERE TODAY BECAUSE ONE OF THEIR TEACHERS WAS VERY RUDE!"

Marie must've figured out who she was facing. She calmly wrote down the list of schools attending that day's performance and sent the old lady, mumbling, on her way.

When I rose from beneath my desk like a reanimated corpse rising from the grave, Marie turned to me and slowly said "Cupo. You owe me."

I sure did.

I was going to title this yarn, "Why I Am Going to Hell", but I decided I believed too much in the Grace of God and the forgiveness of the Spirit for that to be true. I also

figgered that my darling Danny has pushed me into enough good deeds over the years to balance out this one, teensy, tinesy little glitch in my arc of good intentions.

Oh, sure, now that I am approaching oldness myself, I am feeling that crotchety thang rising within my own creaky bones. I actually understand where that um ... lady ... was coming from. I have also learned I can't go through life playing "Whack-a-Mole" with everyone who tweaks my beak.

Look, I knew it was wrong when I did it. But, what IS important is that, in the passing years, I have learned not to enjoy the thought of doing it ... so much.

Repentfully,
Your unworthy servant

Famous People I Have Met (Part 2)

As I look at all this crrrrraziness from my past, I figured I might as well get you even more hyped up and return to a previous topic: “Famous People I Have Met” 2.0

(I have to give credit to my compadrette Rachel for inspiring me to write the “2.0” part. She referenced something in a conversation we had as 2.0. and it made me laugh. So, in the tradition of humorists through the centuries, I am blatantly stealing material!)

In THIS incarnation, I am going to write about three legends of the the-A-ter. This time, however, they aren’t all dead. But the one who is still alive is SO agified, he won’t remember me to refute my claim.

Oh! For you folkses who don’t know WHO the hecky-doodle these people are, just read along and pretend you find it fascinating. Think of it as though you are trying to look cool, when in fact you are just pretending. Who would know?

- Jerome Robbins -

Way back in 1980 (do you realize 1980 was FORTY years ago????), a revival production of “West Side Story” was presented at the Minskoff Theatre in New York City with Debbie Allen as Anita. The year before, I had done an Off Off Broadway show with a beautiful dancer (female, y’all) named Frankie. Beside being a great dancer, she had long, red hair that was truly a unique character trait. Anyway, Frankie got cast as one of the Jet girls in that production.

Around the time they opened, Frankie had an informal cast party at her apartment. She was sweet enough to invite me as well! I remember, in spite of her generosity and earnestly trying to make me feel comfortable, I still felt awkward. I didn’t know anyone there! So, in order to give myself something to do, I wandered around, scoping out the apartment itself and trying not to gawk at the more famous faces.

Most on the cast had gathered in her rather large living room. Next to it was the dining room with a large cased opening between them. The dining room table had been pushed up against the wall, upon which a smorgasbord of food was laid out. For some reason, nobody was at the food table. So, I went over to look it over and put my back to the crowd so it would seem as if I had a “purpose” and tried to look cool. (Who would know? ... sound familiar?)

So, as I stood there, gazing at the banquet, all by my lonesome, I become aware of a person standing rather close to me just to my left. A voice said, “What looks good?”. I turned to gape directly into the face of Jerome Robbins! He looked very put together and was even quite good looking for a man of his “advanced” age of 62 (cough).

As I stared, an urban legend about him flashed through my mind. The story went that he was so disliked by so many, especially his dancers, for his cruel treatment of them, one particular cast watched him back off a stage into an orchestra pit while he was screaming at them. Nobody had said a word of warning.

So now, here I was staring in the face of the ogre himself. I quickly turned to look at the food and stammered something like, "It all looks good". Well don't ya know ... he immediately put me at ease! He was low key and even a bit charming. Maybe he came over to me because no one there wanted to have anything to do with him. I don't know.

Anyway, what did I talk about to Jerome Robbins? His career? No. His accomplishments? No. The amazing people he had worked with? No. I had, oh, so clever repartee with him about food and the weather.

Such a lost opportunity! (Sigh.)

Overall impression: Pleasant to strangers

- Michael Bennett -

As I THINK I had written in a previous chapter-blog-thing (they are all starting to blur together) one of my first jobs in NYC was working the phone room at the Royale Theatre on Broadway selling tickets to "Grease". Not only was the Royale Theatre owned by The Shubert Organization, it acted as one of the co-producers of the show.

Every Christmas season, the Shuberts held a Christmas party at Sardi's. All the employees were invited to go. It was very generous of them with mounds of food and an open bar.

(As a sidebar here, it was even MORE a generous gesture, considering it was a Christmas party and almost the entire hierarchy of the Organization was Jewish).

I found myself in a very crowded, small banquet room above the main dining room. And I mean CROWDED ... I could barely raise my fork to my mouth without rubbing along somebody's torso. ("Hello stranger. New in town?")

As I was standing there, making small talk with some co-workers, I noticed there was a man pushing his way through the crowd coming straight toward me. It was Michael Bennett! As he got closer, I prepared myself to squeeze to the side to give him room to go passed me. Well, don't you know, he stopped directly in front of me and enthusiastically yelled over the crowd noise, "HOW ARE YOU?" and gave me a hug!

I had never actually met the man before in my life! NEVER! Oh, I had auditioned for him, but nothing to merit a hug.

As I was replying "Great! Fine! How are you?", my mind was spinning, thinking, "EEEEK! He thinks I'm somebody else!" I found myself grasping at ANYTHING that would come to mind in order to make chit-chat with this Broadway icon. Did I talk

about to him about his career? No. His accomplishments? No. The amazing people he had worked with? No. Again, I had, oh, so clever repartee with him about food and the weather! (Come oooooonnnnn, Steven!)

After he left, I do remember my face hurting from the overly tight smile I had plastered on my face as I had coughed out my meager conversation through clenched teeth. (Such a goober!)

Overall impression: Very generous in spirit and physically energetic.

- Stephen Sondheim -

What hasn't been written about the poor man? (Why can't they leave him alooone?)

However, here is my tidbit.

In 2002, the Kennedy Center had, what they were calling "The Sondheim Festival". In was six of the man's musicals done in repertory, with three shows rotating over one brief period and three over another. I was incredibly lucky to be cast in the first show of the festival, "Sweeney Todd". I was to play mostly in the always busy chorus, with a plum mini-role of Mr Fogg, the owner of Fogg's asylum. The show starred Brian Stokes Mitchell and Christine Baranski.

(Another brief sidebar while I am talking about celebs. "Stokes", as he likes to be called, is preternaturally nice. He and his wife baked us all ginger-bread men with slit throats of red icing for opening night. Christine is the sweetest "soccer mom" you could meet. She loves to garden and is devoted her "girls").

Steve Sondheim joined us for the last week of rehearsal. He was polite and quiet. But if you had ANY question, he would happily answer it. He stayed through the entire tech rehearsal.

(Now, for the uninitiated, let me 'splain. Tech is when they ... no, not the weather people ... stop and go every moment of a show to set the lights and the sound. Makeup and costumes are also scrutinized. It is a teeeeeeeedious process that goes on for days and days).

Another actor, Larry, and I shared a dressing room that we would "escape" to when we weren't required onstage. At a point in the process, we weren't needed in the scene they (no ...) were currently teching, so we were just hanging out in our room. The room was situated under the stage and was off a long hallway that went the length of the stage above. Our door was open to the hall.

As we relaxing and chatting, we heard a quiet knock and a "mind if I join you?". Sondheim. (MIND IF I JOIN YOU????) We did our best to stay nonchalant and invited

him in. He sat in a chair near the door and started chatting about the show: “How was it going?”, “Were we enjoying ourselves?” ...

Thankfully, I was older than my nerdball encounters of previous years and actually had the wherewithal to ask him some personal-ish questions. We spoke about a fire that had completely engulfed his New York apartment a couple years earlier. He had lost everything, but he seemed quite philosophical about it. It seemed to me as though he had resigned himself to the fact that “things happen” and one needed to move on from the experience.

He was thoughtful in the way he responded to us; no reflection was wasted and everything was carefully considered before he spoke. I didn’t feel he was trying to hide anything, I simply felt that his intellect was guiding him, so that nothing would be wasted; every intention had importance.

Overall impression: Warm, shy and extremely intelligent

And dat’s all ya get.

There might be a part 3, but I will need to delve over my list of “folks of infamy” before I broach the subject again. Who knows? What will be, will be. (And you can quote me.)

So, now that I have denigrated the good name of these peoples, (AND myself) be afraid ... be very afraid. As promised, I may NEXT be writing about you!

Mwahhhahahahhshaaaaah!

Love ya. Mean it.

Anias Cupo

Weather betwixt or between

As I look back on my encounters with strange men, I can't help but notice I am reduced to talking about food or the weather. Why do you suppose we human "beans" do that? I guess in the absence of mutual history, we resort to what we ALL have in common. The universality of weather and food is an obvious easy "hand hold" we can grab onto while we stand there stammering and sweating. Of course, there are other commonalities we share, but are you REALLY going to converse about bathroom habits ("You should've seen that huge b.m. I dropped yesterday!") or death ("I went to my Gran'maw's funeral yesterday. She looked like they stuck a broom up her ... !") to someone you just met?

(Lovely.)

A friend said I should feel free to write about food. SO alright then ... let's begin with a comestible story.

There was the time my long suffering mother's father's sister offered to make an apple pie for one Thanksgiving holiday. Aunt Ethel could NOT cook, but, apparently everyone politely agreed to let her try.

When it came time to cut the pie, my grandmother couldn't get the knife through the top crust. My burly grandfather tried to do it himself, but he just ended up bending the knife. So he left the room and got a hammer and chisel out of the tool box. Subsequently, when he was done, all that was left was a smashed pie plate, apple goo everywhere and an unsullied pie crust which had gone airborne (not unlike Oddjob's hat from "Goldfinger").

So remember, friends, flour and water can be a formidable weapon.

Now I DO have some weather stories. Maybe they aren't as titillating or hi-larious as my past tales, but they have a certain cache about them (... so he coyly states, hoping nobody will notice the bland content about to follow ...)

One of my favorite stories is not mine at ALL! It involves my darling Danny. Danny grew up in the central prairie-lands of Illinois; farm country ... flat farm country ... VERY flat farm country. And, as you all should know by now, tornado territory. Well, one early September, when Danny was in fifth grade, his whole clan gathered one September day to celebrate he and his brother's birthdays, which were two days apart. Well, as the elemental fates would have it, a storm began to brew. Not too long after, a twister appeared on the horizon, growing closer and larger by the minute. However, at this point in their collective life experiences, Danny's relatives were relatively nonplussed about seeing a whirlwind. As a result, rather than running for cover, they all stood outside and watched the darn thing.

But not my Danny! Oh no. He had just received a brand new trumpet and didn't want anything to happen to it. So while his family ogled the coming cataclysm, he was securely tucked in the basement; not thinking of his own life, but of the safety of the trumpet. Well, of course, nothing happened to the people or the property, but poor Danny never lived it down. And, to this day, he remains a music lover.

And then there is LIGHTNING! Oooo, scary-beautiful and don't-mess-with-me stuff!

Another story that isn't mine comes from my high school prom date, Sandy.

While we were still in school, Sandy was electrocuted while eating supper (dinner ... supper ... evening meal ... whatever ...). When the lightning struck the roof of her house, it came down into the building through the electrical system. It fried every appliance they had and shot the knobs off their stove which struck her in the back! But the craziest thing was the bolt continued out an electrical socket in the wall near where Sandy was sitting and burned her arm! She lived to tell the tale.

Of course, nobody believed her, but I was a witness to her injuries. (Think of a teenager's delighted "eww, gross!").

Now, have you ever had a bolt hit NEAR where you were? It is frreaky!

I once was leaving church choir rehearsal one night in DC. A storm had just blown through, which had knocked out the power to the church. Ingenious parishioners that we were, we finished rehearsal using the extra candles meant for Sunday service. By the time we had finished singing, the rain had finally let up. I thought it would be okay to run to my car.

Holy-mother-of-electricity, Batman! As I was scurrying out of the front door, lightning struck the telephone pole not 15 feet away from me. Not only did the sound split my eardrums, the force of the displaced air pushed me and my little umbrella sideways. Actually, I'm not sure it was the moving air or the fact that I jumped and screamed like a ten year old girl that involuntarily moved me the extra five feet. Every hair (yes, I had hair then) was standing straight up. Thankfully, at that moment, the Spector of Death had stepped out for a cigarette break, otherwise, I am sure I would have ended up as a crispy critter. However, I KNOW I was left with an unmistakable glow, which I carry with me to this day (Stawp!).

So, while you are dodging lightning bolts, remember you can never be too careful. In these days, it may not be The Plague that gets ya.

Beware! Them flying pie crusts are lethal.

In fear and wariness,
Your weather "they"

Dining preferences

So, SPEAKING of food ...

WARNING! Do not ever invite me over to dinner.

Nooo, It doesn't have anything to do with my social inadequacy. I won't embarrass your other guests and leave you wondering, "Why the dookie did I invite this guy?" Afterall, it took me YEARS to learn how to PRETEND to behave in polite company. However, if someone with the best of intentions does proffer a generous invitation to dine at their humble abode, I always, sheepishly, spell out what they are getting themselves into and what a bad idea it is ... FOR THEM. Then, I give them plenty of space and time to back out of said offer.

You see, the difficulty with me is ... I can't eat ANYTHING; that is ... anything a normal American human being will usually want to serve at a dinner or supper or lunch or breakfast or midnight snack!

It's not because I have a finicky palette and won't like what you make. I adore most foods ... except beets; they taste like dirt.

No, the snag is ... well ... sort-a like some people who are unlucky in love, I have been unlucky in health. To be more specific, I've been unfortunate to have a stupid history of getting stupid health related stuff which stupidly prevents me from eating FOOD!!

As I said earlier, I ain't lookin' for pity. IF I hear from ANYBODY who starts out with a "Poor Steven" or "I'm so sorry" or "Gee, that's terrible", I'll be ... well ... put off ... HARSHLY! (Boy, I bet THAT put the fear in ya!)

If no one has told you by now, there are reasons things are the way they are. And as "riDICulous" as they are, these are the facts, son:

- - in my teens and twenties , I had non-viral hepatitis. I was put on a NO fat diet and lost the ability to digest lactose. No dairy.

- - in 2007, I developed a malignancy in the bowel. After four months of radiation tap-dancing on my innards, I could no longer digest gluten. No bread. No pasta. No wheat flour.

- - in late 2016, I developed Parkinsons-like symptoms. A neurologist figured out it wasn't something so insidious, but was a condition where I could not process Vitamin B6, causing nerve damage. So no foods high in B6. Avoid meat. No bananas.

(CAREFUL! ... your motherly instincts are kicking in.)

- - in 2017, I was diagnosed with late-onset diabetes. So ... no sugar/low carbs.

- - soon afterward, I began experiencing chronic kidney stones. Urology said, "foods low in oxalates only!" So no leafy greens, especially spinach. No nuts. No berries.

Blah, blah, blah!

Okay ... I'm done now.

It makes one wanna throw any thought of gracious hospitality out the window, don't it?

Now, in spite of all this hilarity, I do get by. And, really, I don't let it get to me. Despite being a delicate flower, I'm a hale and hearty fella who can always find something to gnaw on ... except beets.

Did I mention, I hate beets?

And LIVER!! (aaahhhuucckkggggghh!!!!)

Why do people always think they are improving the flavor of liver by adding sautéed onions??? NO! It doesn't work!! It STILL tastes like LIVERRRR!!!! (ayuckhh!!!) You could pile an entire prime rib dinner with mashed potatoes and gravy and lovely haricots verts and finish off the heap with home made apple pie a la mode and a glass of fine port ... and you would STILL taste liver!!!

AWFUL! Just AWFUL!

Now THAT said, my long suffering mother LOVED liver. LOVED IT!! To my brothers and I, it was horrifying to even THINK about.

Though once, she tried to coerce us to get it passed our lips. She thought she was being sooooo clever. (C'mon! IT'S LIVERRRRR!!!!)

My younger brother, Mike, wasn't around quite yet, so he was spared her subterfuge. But my older brother, John and I were the victims of her stratagem.

Aaaaas yooooou knooooow, we didn't have much money in them days, so getting a treat of ANY kind was .. well ... a treat.

(Careful ... no pity ...)

One day she took us grocery shopping. As we were quite little, we always tagged along. There was no reason to be suspicious.

Out of the blue she said, "Would you like a candy bar?"

We went NUTS!!!

Would we like a CANDY BARRRR??!?

"You can pick out any one you want."

WE CAN PICK OUT ANY ONE WE WANT??!?

"But you can't eat it until after supper".

After supper ... OKAY ... okay ... we can't eat it until after supper. We can wait. We can do this. This is great! OUR VERY OWN CANDY BAR!!!!

Thus, I, thoughtfully, and with great care, opted for a Three Musketeers bar.

When we got home, after the table was set, John and I lovingly placed our candy bars just above our dishes, as though they were integral parts of our place servings. We wanted to be readily prepared to tear open our new treasures. It was like Christmas!

The food came ...

She served liver.

We CRIIIIED! And CRIIIED! And sobbed and wept and wailed and CRIIIIED!

And she gave up.

“ALRIGHT! BUT ... You have to eat one bite of it, then finish everything else on your plate.

We cut off the teeniest piece we could, gingerly held our noses and GAGGED ... but we did it! In order to get the HORRIBLE taste out of our mouths, we scarfed down the rice and vegetables and leapt from the table with our treasured cache, not feeling the LEAST bit guilty!

Liver, indeed! It was the first time in my five year old life, I felt indignant.

The nerve!

My darling Danny has an even better yarn.

It seems, HIS mother also enjoyed liver and onions, (aaauuccckkkgghh!) while it made the rest of his family gag. One evening, she got out the Griswald cast iron frying pan and proceeded to add butter and onions ... and then the wretched liver. Danny said the smell in the house was unbearable. So his father gathered his children around him in the kitchen, picked the hot skillet up off the stove and paraded the clan outside into the side yard, where he promptly buried it, INCLUDING THE SKILLET, in the ground next to Danny's sister's already interred clarinet (!)

I love that story.

So, boys and girls ... what have we learned here today?

- 1) Do not invite me to dinner.
- 2) Do not pity me.
- 3) I will NOT eat liver (aaauuccckkkggh!)
- 4) Have a nice day! (That part of the story was implied.)

Yours in a low-fat, non-gluten, B6 free, no sugar, skip the spinach nuts and berries, liver-free kind-a way,

The Phantom Dinner Guest

Get Stuffed

Actually, I DO have a few more grub related stories to tell.

When I used to be a “normal” person (oh, but “normal” is such a cagey word), I could eat food things! (That’s what “normal” people call that stuff, right? “Food things”? ... It was so long ago, I can’t remember.)

And like all “normal” families, holidays were the ultimate in enjoying food things together. Gathering and gorging on everything you came in contact with was a great tradition! Of course, over-drinking was also part of the fun! Then, afterward, rolling over to some couch, chair or settee somewhere near a television set to watch the football game and promptly falling into a deep, drooling sleep. LOTS O’ FUN!

Oh, wait ... that was just the men.

The women always got stuck swabbing up after everyone departed the table, leaving them as scullery maids and the lowest of the low menial workers. Females in the household were lucky if they got the pleasure of even glimpsing a semi-naked teen queen jiggling her stuff in the televised halftime show.

Although, that IS what women folk like to do, am I right? As a manly man, now that I think of it, I KNOW I’m right! Let the little women have their fun in the kitchen. That’s what they were born to do anyway, RIGHT??

(Oooooooooooooo, for some reason a deep chill just ran through me. I am sensing the specter of death frighteningly near. How sudden. How strange. Was it something I said?)

Butcha KNOW ... there actually are people ... female AND male ... who enjoy all the cooking and clean up and back-breaking work. They are called masochists.

Or maybe they are just shy. Afterall, it IS easier to hide in the kitchen than be forced to talk to Uncle Bernie about his goiter. Or maybe they are grandstanders, craving and demanding attention ... no, those people are called actors.

Or maaaaaybeeee, they are just reeeeeeally nice folks who love to cook and truly want their kin to find happiness by coming together to enjoy their food ... things.

And then there are those wonderful people who take their generosity juuuuuust a little too far.

Every Thanksgiving and Christmas, my family would get together with my maternal side to share in the celebrations. My father’s side always went to Florida for the winter, so they were never around.

(Oh, those long-distance phone calls for “Merry Christmas” wishes, where you leave both parties’ numbers with the operator, who then calls you back when a clear line has been established ... remember, you old people?)

Anyway, the task of cooking always seesawed between my long suffering mother, her mother or, sometimes, my mommy's sister, Shirley, whose husband was in the marines but, because he was often stationed out of the country, they weren't always around for the holidays.

GREAT meals! GREAT fun. Lotsa love!

Well, one Thanksgiving when I was about 6 or 7, for SOME reason (which I don't remember) we were going to go to my poor father's aunt's house in Tuckahoe, NY, just north of Manhattan. My Auntie Edith was my dad's mother's younger sister. Because she and her husband, our Uncle Nick, lived so far south from us (about 2 1/2 hours drive ... whew!), we hardly ever saw them. But, that year, we were gathering in their small apartment, along with Edith's and Nick's kids and their families. It was a mob of Italians. (Oops! I gotta be careful when I put "mob" and "Italians" together in the same sentence.)

ANYWAY ...

When it was about noon and time to eat, we all sat down at the table, looking forward to the turkey and gravy.

Oh! I should add, Auntie Edith had a swinging door between the kitchen and dining room. Beside the wonderful aromas, you couldn't see in in order to tell what was coming out.

So, there we all were, ready and anticipating our traditional Thanksgiving dinner. Auntie Edith went into the kitchen and came out with a HUGE platter of ... spaghetti and meatballs. As she lovingly placed it in the center of the table, all her family oohed and aahed. My family looked at each other, thinking "What the dookie?" (I know I use that word a lot, but I decided I liked it too much to be a one time thing.) My immediate family all looked at each other in confusion ... that is, except my dad, who fell into the oohing and aahing of his relatives.

I didn't know what to say. "WHERE THE HECK IS MY TURKEY????!?" Not a good idea when you are 7 years old. SO I decided to go with the flow and piled my plate with Auntie Edith's (it turned out) DELICIOUS homemade spaghetti and meatballs. Oh, it was HEAVENLY GOOOD! I went in for seconds until I was stuffed to the gills! My Auntie was SO pleased. And I was happy she was happy.

After those dishes were cleared away, nobody moved from the table. I just figured, instead of waiting to have dessert later, as we did in my house, we were having it now. But, instead of the expected apple and pumpkin pies, small bowls of sherbet were placed in front of each of us.

Again, I thought, "Oh, well" and finished mine, thoroughly enjoying it.

When the bowls had been cleared, and like the good child I was, I asked to be excused from the table. I was STUFFED and was ready to go play some games. Somebody said, "Where are you going? The best is yet to come!"

At that, my Auntie backed her way out of the kitchen, butting the door out of her way to reveal an even LARGER platter of an entire salmon with roasted potatoes and green beans.

I froze.

However, in my head, I was screaming, "WHAT??? THIS DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE!!!".

Little did I know.

Auntie Edie, in her good hearted way, cried "Mangia! Mangia!" ("Eat! Eat!"). I still didn't move. My long suffering mother caught my eye and in her own not-always-so-sweet-through-clenched-teeth way, said, "Eat something, Steven". I started to say something like, "I'm fulllllll." But barely got the "f" out before I was shut down.

"Mangia! Mangia! Look how skinny you are!"

VERY reluctantly, I slapped a small piece of fish, a couple of potatoes and ... uh-hh ... green beans on my plate and, as painful as it was, began to force feed myself. ("C'mon lips ... We're in this thing together.")

"Mangia! Have some bread and butter!"

I looked at my sweet aunt, and like a prisoner going to the gallows, slowly moved myself closer to the bread bowl.

After what seemed like a torturously long period, I somehow managed to push, wheedle and shove what was on my plate into my mouth ... except, of course, for the bread and butter, which ended up getting stashed, unseen, between my brother's glass and the lip of the closest serving dish.

AT LAST, those plates were cleared away. Everyone, except my brother John, my mommy and I threw themselves back into animated conversation.

Then the antipasta came out.

"NO! Nonononononononononononooooo!"

"Mangia! Mangia! Look at all this good food! Don't let it go to waste!!"

I took an olive. It was greasy.

The drinking and the chatting and the eating went on while I wondered if it was possible to die from exploding.

Finally ... antipasta ... gone ...

... but THEN ...

(... You know it's coming ...)

Out came the turkey AND dressing AND mashed potatoes AND gravy AND yams AND cranberry sauce AND ...

I left the table.

My mother made some excuse by saying something like, "He's getting tired."

"TIRED! TIRED! We had been sitting there for what feels like 83 HOURS, piling food into our maws until we are dying here! DYING!!! Yeah, I'm tired! SICK and tired!!!"

But I just smiled weakly, stumbled into the living room, only to discover "King Kong" playing on the television set.

Somehow, it seemed appropriate.

Looking back, I can't say anything bad about my great aunt and uncle. They were truly wonderful, generous people who loved their family and loved giving of themselves. It was simply a matter of two cultures colliding.

Even so, I still have psychological scars and wince every time I hear, "Mangia!"

Up to his gills,
Stevie

Family Fun

We always went on a summer vacation. Always. My long suffering mother was the mover and the shaker when it came to this annual family event. I suppose, most of the time, as an operating room nurse, she felt cramped in a small room with blood and guts as her companions. She must have had the need to break out at least once a year and enjoy the open road and wide open spaces. My poor father was mostly indifferent. But when up against a force of nature, as my mother indeed was, he didn't really have a choice in the matter.

We Cupos didn't really have much money ("oh, really?"), so my parents invariably finagled a free stay at one relative's house or another, even with the prospect of us three boys tearing the joint apart.

(Boys will be boys ...)

And we kids LOVED vacation!

It wasn't that we didn't have stuff to do in Schenectady. It was simply a case of HOW many TIMES could a person sneak into the forbidden, "Do NOT go down there", swampy remains of the Erie Canal or walk to the top of Putnam hill to Cobblestone Church and jump around on all the gravestones; the typical behavior of well-behaved children? Visiting Grammie or Mom (as we called our grandmothers) was always fun, but even that got a little repetitive after a while. C'mon! They LIVED in the neighborhood!

Thankfully, my mother's younger sister, Lee (real name Leocadia ... no wonder she changed it) was a constant source of vacation getaway fun. She lived in Massachusetts, near where the armpit of Cape Cod begins. Oceanside adventures of finding starfish in the FREEZING Atlantic or getting grossed out as the seaweed wrapped itself around our legs was always something to look forward to.

Then, on the other side of the family, all my dad's kin lived near New York City; a COMPLETE change from where we existed! Wow! Real smog!!

Even better, his cousin "Edie Bop" lived ON Coney Island.

Her real name was Edith Boscia, named after her Aunt Edith of "Mangia!" fame. Edie Bop was a tall, willowy red-head who inherited her Irish mother's genetic legacy. Her father was my father's namesake, Everard. Uncle Ev had already passed on before I came into the picture, so I never knew him. However there were plenty of family stories about him that were told and retold which kept him "alive".

(Indulge me for a moment here ...)

Everard was a wise guy and a character. He was a good looking guy with a big personality. He liked to womanize as much as he liked to party. Uncle Everard owned a

garage in Schenectady, that “may or may not” have had underworld underpinnings. MY father, Everard, worked for him just after he got out of the service at the end of WWII.

Dad tells the story of how one day, after work, Uncle Ev was driving them home. As they dodged in and out of General Electric rush hour traffic, they passed a bus stop that had a pretty girl waiting nearby, who happened to be vigorously chomping on some gum. Dad said they went about a half a block passed her, when Uncle Ev suddenly slammed on the brakes and, IN rush hour traffic, reversed the car all the way back to the bus stop. He leaned out the window and yelled, “Hey! How’s that gum?!?”

A real charmer.

Anyway, back to Edie Bop; tall and beautiful and really smart. And I loved her. There was something about her and I which really clicked. Even though she was my father’s age, she understood me and I got her. Maybe because, just like me, she was a rebel. She had been a real-live, bongo beating, beret wearing, gutsy smoking Beatnik in New York City of the 1950’s. Sooo cool! And she could write! Later in life, she even became the theatre critic for our area in upstate New York! I loved it when the “newspaper rep” came to my summer stock shows at the Lake George Playhouse. I certainly wasn’t gonna tell anyone the reviewer was my COUSIN!

So, for a few days in 1964, Edie Bop allowed our family to stay at her digs on Coney Island for our designated summer vacation. We were going to the New York World’s Fair, which really wasn’t that far a ride from her flat. Now, being that Edie Bop still was very bohemian, she didn’t have a lot of furniture, so we all had to sleep on the FLOOR. We kids didn’t mind; it was “fun”. But the thought of my long suffering mother on the floor over night was a bit much for my 10 year old mind to wrap around. Also, because of Edie’s rebellious ways, she never cleaned ... AND she lived near the beach ... AND she had two cats ... AND the cats had free range of the house, going anywhere and everywhere they wanted. I thought my professional nurse of a mother was going to shrivel up and blow away.

Well, at least the stay was free; just not free of cat hair and beach sand ... on the floor ... where we were sleeping.

If nothing else, the Fair was clean.

And we did enjoy going to it. So much so, we returned the following year to attend it again ... sans my mother. (Hm.)

Being that it was the 1960’s, my father decided he wanted to get one of the newest gadgets on the market to document our adventures; a Kodak Super 8 Millimeter camera. (Ugh!)

With the attention grabbing, “look at me” mentality of we kids, you would THINK we would be beside ourselves with excitement about that camera. But, no, I tell you, no. It was IN our faces every waking moment.

I remember one CHRISTMAS MORNING when dad wasn't happy about the shot he had taken of us coming down the stairs. He made us “Christmas-present-mad-foaming-at-the-mouths kids go BACK upstairs so he could re-shoot the scene. We developed a distinct dislike for the thing. No wonder there are so many takes of us frowning or hiding or actually running away.

And, of COURSE, it was EVER present at every vacation.

(Now ... in retrospect ... I do have to hand it to him. We actually have some great footage of the '64/'65 Worlds Fair, which is fun to watch. However ... THAT is an exception.)

However, dad had this one little “habit” that may answer the question of why HE liked it so much.

After our time away was over and we had trundled back home, there was always the obligatory viewing of our family vacation films. Because we always travelled to see relatives, the footage was invariably of the ocean on Cape Cod or the shore at Coney Island. However, more than once, after focusing on we progeny playing in the sand, the image would slowly drift away from us, toward some unknown female, usually in a skimpy bathing suit and follow her as she walked down the beach.

One of us would always yell out, “Who's that lady??”

Uncharacteristically, my mother stayed stoically silent.

I guess dad was a lot more like his Uncle Ev than he ever let on.

So, if you ever want to come over and watch my family home movies with me, I've got a whole bunch of strange women for you to take a gander at! Who knows? Some of you might even recognize a relative or two of your own!

And with summer in mind, I just want to say I can't wait until this plague is over and we ALL go on vacation again. Bring your bathing suits and sun screen!

MY viewfinder is ready ...

The Next Generation

WHAT just happened? (Part 2)

Thinking about Auntie Edith reminded me of why I sleep with the covers over my head. No, Auntie E. wasn't some specter in the night who came back to haunt me. She was a lovely, OVERLY generous person, always willing to do anything for her family. On the contrary, it has to do with a visit we took to dad's relatives in Tuckahoe (where, if you were paying attention ... sheesh! ... was where Auntie Edith lived) when I was a wee bairn. (I say "wee" because I couldn't have been more than five at the time.)

We were all gathering at my Great Uncle Mike's house. Mike was the guy I was telling you about who was the Press Rep for CBS Radio. Well, Mike had gone to that great broadcasting station in the sky only a few years before, so we were taking a vacation to re-connect with his LARGE family (nine kids!) and other aunts and cousins living in the area.

It was decided that our four family members (my poor father, my long suffering mother, my brother John and I ... no Mike ... he wasn't a twinkle yet) would be distributed over the various households over night in order to accommodate the limited sleeping arrangements within each household. I was to stay with the GROUP at the Uncle Mike house because I had twin cousins living there (fraternal boy and girl) who were my age. The feeling being, I would be more comfortable with kids my age nearby.

(As an aside here ... Uncle Mike ended up having TWO sets of twins! I'd venture to say, them was mighty potent genetics!)

I remember, I was assigned a room with two twin beds. It was the bedroom of the male twin of my age, Billy. The bed I was in had been vacated by an older male cousin who was sleeping somewhere else in the house.

That house! It was an old, rambling Victorian with many rooms to make plenty of space for all those kids. But, I don't mind telling you, it was creeeepy! Walking around it, I always felt like there was something heavy in the air. It sure didn't feel like my happy home in Schenectady. (Siblings of mine, no comments, please ...)

Anyway, that night, they (no, not the weather people) had left a light on in the hallway outside the room, so I could find my way around in case I needed to get up in the middle of the night. With the light streaming in, the bedroom was very well lit.

I had almost drifted off to sleep, when ... suddenly ... someone YANKED my hair! (Yes, you naysayers ... I once had hair. Ggggg!)

I immediately woke me up, thinking, "Who the F\$€k ...?" (Nooo, my little five year self wasn't yet that jaded, potty mouthed sailor I would grow up to be. But the thought WAS along those lines.) I looked around, then up at the head board, but didn't

see anybody there. I could see my cousin sleeping in the bed across from me, so I deduced it wasn't him. It was weird.

After thinking about it for awhile, I figured I dreamed it and settled back down. A few minutes later ... YANK! It was a hard pull that time which really hurt. I quickly looked up again. Nobody. Nothing. So, as fast as I could, I swung my head down below the bed to look under it, thinking somebody was playing a trick on me. Empty space.

Nobody there.

The bed was situated tightly into a corner of the room, so I knew no one could fit between the headboard and the wall.

Hmmmm ... Even as a little one, I knew something "weren't right".

No sooner than I lay my little curly head back down again, when ... YANK!

I did what any warm-blooded five year old would do, I yelled for my mother ... annoyingly. After waking up my unhappy relatives, my aunt called out from her bed, telling me my mother was at Auntie Edith's and to "go back to sleep!". I guess after having nine kids, including two sets of twins, she was used to midnight disturbances. I supposed, at that point of her life, only a fire or an earthquake would get her out of bed.

So, I sat up in my berth, hands clutching my knees, tired and frustrated and contemplated what to do next. I looked around and around. Still nothing.

Then, I decided I needed aid here. Since I had just aroused my cousin from my previous yowling, I asked him to come over to my bed (shut up all you naughty thoughted people!) and check around FOR me. I would be the lookout and he would be the scout. (Westerns were really big in those days.) He was cranky and annoyed, but he did it. In his own five year old way, he assured me there was nobody and nothing and to "go back to sleep!"

This was becoming a pattern.

THEN I had the bright idea that maybe my hair (sigh! ... hair ...) was getting caught between where the headboard met the mattress. (For a kid-ling, I admit, I had me some deductive powers!) Thus, I scooted myself halfway down the mattress, dragging my pillow with me. "This will do the trick!" (I probably didn't say "trick", but it was the equivalent word for whatever goes on in a tot's brain.)

I lay back down.

YANK!!!

I had HAD IT!!!

I didn't know what was going ON. No one was HELPING me. My parents were GOD only knows where. AND I NEEDED TO SLEEP!!!

Finally, with resolve, I re-positioned my bedding back into its normal positions, settled myself as if nothing had happened, quickly sat up and stuck my tongue out at the headboard and threw the covers over my head.

I never was bothered again.

Of course it took me a while to figure out how to BREATHE. I slept on my stomach and peeped my nose out from underneath the bedclothes... but, as I say, I was never bothered again. And, of course, when I got home, I recreated the scenario in order to make SURE it would never happen again.

And, after a few years, what can I say? Old habits die hard.

Nowadays, because I am old, I can't sleep on my stomach anymore. I get such a heartburn and a crick in my neck ... oy! But I DO gratuitously keep the sheet firmly planted over one ear and part of my head juuust in case some ghoulie wants to, once again, torment me by pulling my hair.

Oh, wait ... I don't have hair ...

Well ... as I said, old habits die hard.

And, so, from that boo-eauty salon on the other side, I wish you happy slumbers.

See you in your dreams.

Mwuh-huh-huuuuh!

The hairless stalker

'Til death do us part

Sometimes, I can be quite practical. For example, I already have my headstone installed.

(I say "headstone". You say "gravestone" ... "headstone", "gravestone", "potAto", "poTAHto" ...)

Now some of you less pragmatic folks may think, "Ewwwwww, THAT'S morbid!" It is not macabre as you judge; as I just said, it's practical. When it comes time for me to go to that great sanitarium in the sky, no one will need to deal with that particular peculiarity.

Although, I think my darling Danny has the best idea. After he gets burnt to a crisp, he just wants his ashes to be randomly scattered from here to Kingdom come. No body; no headstone. Now his mother was rather peeved at this notion. She was upset that she would have no where to go if she wanted to pay respects to his remains. Danny's replay was, "Are you planning for me to go before you?". She stepped back.

Anyway, it wasn't so much that I was obsessing about having the thing already in place at my demise. It was more of a matter of a series of events that led to an obvious conclusion.

Back in the early 1960's, the governing body of my church, the 2nd Reformed Church of Rotterdam (Rotterdam, NY is a suburb of Schenectady. Rotterdam harkens back to its original European settlers who were the Dutch.) devised a plan to get "quick" money into the church coffers without too much extra work. They decided to have a "three for four" sale; buy three grave sites and get a fourth one for FREE! It wasn't a great sell for the squeamish, but it did do the trick. Members flocked to take advantage of it, including my maternal grandparents, Helen and Roy Smith. They must have figured they would take two plots and MY parents would use the remaining two.

Well, the Fates barged in again (I mentioned them in a past missal) when my grandmother's unmarried oldest brother, John (too many Johns), moved in with them. Unfortunately, soon after, John suddenly died. When they looked at the prospects of where and how to inter him, the obvious option was to give him residence in one of the recently purchased plots. After all, there were plenty to go around!

After both Roy and Helen passed, my mommy's sister, Shirley, received the deed for the one remaining plot. Now, Shirley already had full intentions of being buried next to her first husband, Pete, so she was just holding on to the deed for no other reason in particular other than if one of her kids wanted it.

A few years later, I was talking to my long suffering mother. She told me she and dad had just purchased THEIR plots in Cobblestone's cemetery and, in passing, mentioned that the single plot was still floating around.

This is when my practical side kicked in. I got to thinkin', if no one wants it, I would ask Aunt Shirley if I could have it. If she took pity on me and relented, I would be buried next to my Grammie, who was my favorite person in the whole world! Shirley did, I got it and all was right with the dirt!

Several years after that, my darling Danny and I were in my home town, to pay OUR respects to said family members and take pictures of headstones for his ancestry research of my relatives. When we got to my grandparents' and Great Uncle John's sites, I noticed that all three existing headstones were identical. So my OCD side decided mine would need to be exactly the same.

I immediately contacted a monument mason company, did a pencil rubbing of Grammie's stone. I, then, sent in the rubbing, one of Dan's pictures, a photocopy of the deed and my money and placed an order! A few weeks later, they sent me a thank you letter along with a picture of my newly installed stone!

I do need to add that it did not yet have a death date etched into the thing. But that would be for another day.

Now, Shirley had a headstone story of her own.

After Pete died, she married a ne'er-do-well named Don. Yes, love was blind for Shirley. But she eventually came to her senses and split from the sucker. Delusional, Don got it in his head that Shirley was going to come back to him. So much so, he had a twin cemetery plot and double headstone made up with both their names on it! He put Shirley's death date as the day of their divorce! (At least the guy had a sense of humor.) When Shirley found out, she took him to court in order to have her name chiseled out of the stone. She won. Now somewhere on the East Coast, there is a headstone with some guy's name and a missing chunk of marble next to it.

One more thing regarding the peccadillos of my family and our final resting places.

On my father's maternal side, NOBODY has a birth date on their grave markers; brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles ... NO ONE! We could never figure it out. The death date was there, but not the birth. I always thought it was because of a family trait where they were all a bit vain about their ages. As a matter of fact (sshhh, don't tell anyone) ... every ten years, my grandmother put a different birth year on her Census form.

However, a nutty (or not so nutty) thought recently came into my head. (One of the very few thoughts I've had of recent). From Dan's ancestor research, from what we can figger, my grandmother was born in Italy and was brought over here by her older

brother, who also had been born in Italy. Yet, at least in the case of my grandmother, she always wrote New York City as her place of birth. YIKES, Scooby Doo! Could she and some of her siblings never have been naturalized citizens and remained illegal immigrants all their lives??? By being cagey about their dates of birth, were they thinking it would be harder for the authorities to trace them?

EEEEEEK! NOW PLEASE ... PLEASE ... EVERYBODY CALM DOWN!

(I can hear my brothers yelling at me all ready.)

THIS is only speculation scribbled down by a questionably sane person in a not-so well documented, speculative manner. I am not SAYING that this is the-truth-and-nothing-but-the-truth-so-help-me-God. But, if the facts don't add up, isn't it more fun to fabricate a good story in order to fill in the blanks? Afterall, a WHOLE lot of politicians do it everyday!

And besides, what does it matter? Some day, we are all gonna be resting under our own headstones anyway.

I just won't have to pay for mine.

In somber thought,
The Man in Black

My Favorite Danny Stories

Now, for the past eight hundred or nine hundred pages, I have been droning on and on (and on) with stories about MY family. We all know EVERYBODY'S family has stories of interest or skeletons in the closet or dead bodies buried in the backyard ...

... wait ... ummm ...

But there is one important family member I have managed to leave almost COMPLETELY out (except for the stories I've already told about him). That would be my darling Danny, father of my children ... oh, wait ... we don't have any children ... companion to our pets ... uh, no ... we don't have any pets ... I AM the pet ...

(Backing up ...)

That would be my darling Danny.

Danny has told me some great yarns about his kin over our eighty-two years together which have been the source of hours of fun at various gatherings and funerals. But now, I am putting them in writing for the ages; for all posterity; for all ETERNITY!

(Have I ever mentioned I was an actor?)

BUT FIRST ... History:

Danny Engeljohn was born a citizen of the United States. (That is very important to make clear these days.) He hails from south central Illinois in Effingham County.

(Did you know, the "city" of Effingham has one of the largest truck stops in the entire U.S. of A.? ... oooooo!)

He is the second child of Carroll (... that's his FATHER, y'all) and Oma.

Now I know all you Deutschlanders and Europeans of similar decent are thinking right now, "But isn't that the word for grandmother?" Yes. Yes it is.

The reason why she was named that was ... originally her first name was to be Glenna, after her father, Glenn. And her middle name was to be Evelyn. But her mother balked at Evelyn because it was the name of her uncle's horse. Then, by coincidence, Oma's mother's best friend's daughter's birthday was on the day Oma was born ... and that daughter's name was ... all together ... Gertrude! ... No! Oma!!! Besties forever and "Oma" won out.

Anyway, the Engeljohn siblings names (in order of birth): Debi, Daniel, David and Dee. Following suit, Carroll's only sibling, Donnie (and Aunt Norma) had three children and all three of their names began with a "D". (Of course, Donnie didn't have the children by himself. Aunt Norma had something to do with it as well!)

So! ... they were the "Three D's" and the "Four D's".

(Danny ended up making his career at the USDA in Food Safety. He recently told me animals ineligible for food were referred to as “The Four D’s”: “Dead, Dying, Diseased and Disabled”.)

Hm.

Moving on ...

Danny received his B.S. and M.S. in Animal Science at the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana. He is also a ffffd ... PhD: Nutrition from Howard University. He actually ended up teaching there, but his primary career was Food Safety (F.S.I.S., kids!) He even worked his way up to the S.E.S. level before he retired. (“Super Exciting Superguy”! ... Okay, okay ... Senior Executive Service.)

But! As crrrrazy as it sounds, WHILE he was getting his doctorate AND working full time at USDA, he worked as a busboy at a fancy-schmancy restaurant in downtown DC in order to make enough money for a down payment on our HOUSE! If that isn’t the definition of “workaholic” (albeit, lovable, dedicated workaholic), I don’t know what is!

Danny and I met IN CHURCH ... well ... practically. I was dating his best friend, Leon, who introduced us at the Ford’s Theatre box office where I worked. BUT, we got to KNOW each other at church.

(Now for those of you who are still awake and keeping track, NO, I was no longer dating Leon when Danny and I started out together. Please, I’m not THAT much of a wonton! ... Wait ... Isn’t that a soup?).

When we started dating, he says he didn’t know we were dating. But c’mooon ... what do you call dinner and a movie? Hand gliding????

Anyway, we committed to each other on Valentine’s Day in 1990 and, when it was legal, married in 2014. So, as I’ve said, we’ve been together eighty-two years. (That would be in “gay years”.)

Danny grew up on the prairie. On second thought ... it would be more like “Prairie” with a capital “P”. The “P” is for Pflat! Or, as one would say in American ... flat, flat, flat.

“How flat was it?”

It was SO flat ... it was flat. (Well then ... It was flat as that joke!)

And lots and lots of farmland.

Danny grew up on a farm. They raised dairy cattle, pigs, chickens ... you know, the usual. They also grew corn and sorghum. Again, the usual.

Some of Danny’s best stories come from life on the farm.

As an example:

When he was a little guy, maybe around 9 or 10, the grain silos in and around his family’s farm had not yet been built. Which meant, they had to truck their grain along

old Rte. 40 to the grain elevator in the neighboring town of St. Elmo. He and his mother were in line along the side of the road with about 100 other farmers, waiting to dump their grain. Danny said, as they were sitting there, he could see his mother's lips starting to move as though she wanted to say something. She suddenly burst out, "You know people have sex just like pigs do!!"

(Yes. Yes they do.)

Danny said he got out of the truck and walked to the elevator and sat by the side of the road until she had edged her way up to him.

I guess she figured the facts of life didn't vary no matter what species it was.

Another one:

(This also happened when Danny was still a kid.)

Danny's younger brother, David, apparently was a wild child. He instigated a lot of antics that Danny always seemed to go along with. Debi, the oldest sibling, always had really thin hair. She regularly had to drink an orange, gelatin powder, mixed with water, not unlike Tang, which supposedly was to help with thickening her hair. Because David and Danny were farm kids, they knew what was needed to help their crops to grow: manure! So, one day, they decided Debi needed the same treatment. (If it worked for the corn ...) Initiated by David, they got a pail and gathered together a pile of chicken manure. They, then, convinced Debi this was a workable solution.

Apparently, the chicken manure wasn't the best fix.

Another favorite of mine involved just Carroll and Oma.

Besides farming, Carroll had some side jobs. One of them being a rural postal carrier. He liked it so well, he ended up being appointed to a position in the Rural Postal Carriers Union. This required him to occasionally speak at meetings or even conferences in and around Illinois.

On one occasion, he and Oma were to drive to somewhere near St. Louis in order for Carroll to give a speech; about an hour and forty-five minute drive away. Usually, when they went on these trips, Oma would always want to stop at some store or mall along the route to do some shopping.

And so, as per their usual custom, they stopped in Vandalia, which was on the way, in order for Oma to do her "thing".

Now, the Engeljohn's almost always owned a van. When Oma would go on her shopping forays, Carroll would always move to the back of the van and go to sleep. After Oma was done, she would get into the drivers seat and, when getting them to their destination, wake up Carroll. They would, then, finish their business and go home.

Well, Oma finished shopping at this particular mall, got into the driver's seat and drove the hour to their destination. When she hollered for Carroll to wake up ... HE WASN'T THERE!

Apparently, while in the back, he saw someone he knew. So he got out of the van to say hello to his acquaintance and walked with the guy to wherever he was going at the mall. That's when Oma must have gotten back to the van.

And off she went!

This was before cell phones. So Carroll just found a pay phone and called ahead to the venue to tell them what happened. He told them to make Oma give his speech.

And she DID!!!

Thank goodness, she had typed it out for him. He also told them to tell Oma to pick him up at a bar near where she had abandoned him. He and his pal would be having a few!

I LOVE that story! (Just one more ... pleeeeeease?)

When Danny first moved to DC for his job at the USDA, his parents would usually drive up every few years for a visit. (They continued this tradition after Danny and I got together). Anyway, they always seemed to bring some family members or friends along with them.

On this visit, they had brought Debi, her husband, Bob and their three kids along. One night, after they had gone out to eat, Oma decided she just HAD to go to a Kmart near Danny's apartment to see "what they had". Well, Carroll and Bob weren't crazy about the idea. But Danny knew of a bar across the parking lot from Kmart he could show them where they could pass the time. It was called Daphne's Steaks and Strip Joint. So, it was agreed that Oma and Debi would go to Kmart, Carroll and Bob would go to Daphne's and Danny would stay in the van with the kids.

After the women returned to the van, they all waited and waited, but Carroll and Bob didn't come out. After a while, Debi said she would go in to get them. After ANOTHER long wait, Debi didn't come out. So now Danny went in to see what was happening.

What was happening was a party! Carroll and Bob had essentially closed the place down. Danny found the two of them, Debi and ALL the strippers at a huge table playing cards and hooting it up! They were all kicking back and having a great time! It took a while for them to wrap it up and get back home. It was really late before they all got to bed.

Danny said, the next morning, Bob announced that that was the best sex he and Deb had ever had!

And with that image in mind, I am going to stop for now. But, obviously there are A LOT more anecdotes to tell. It looks like this is gonna be a two-parter. Whatcha say? So, remember, when the manure hits the fan and the animals start having sex, it's time to give them a little privacy and mosey along.

Y'all come back now, ya hear?

MORE My Favorite Danny Stories

Well, THAT was quick!

So, as I said, Danny was high up in the ranks of the Food Safety and Inspection Services for USDA. That's what "F.S.I.S." means. (I know I merely typed out the initials on my last chapter, but, I'm sure, many of you just skipped over it with an "oh, well!"). What that means is he had his fingers on your meat, whether you felt it or not. Whenever there was a recall of some beef, pork or poultry product, he was in the middle of it.

I remember, once, he travelled to a little town in California to shut down a meat processing plant which had some pretty bad offenses. It was the main, if not only, industry in that area. I knew he was going to get dead. I was sure the next time I saw him would be in a box. But, thankfully, no. His charm and intelligence won them over and they didn't end up poisoning his toothpaste.

Danny even got to fly on "Air Force One" (without the president ... which actually just makes it an airplane). When that awful anthrax poisoning scare happened a few years ago, Danny was chosen for the panel of experts to fly to different facilities around the country to determine the capacity for handling the irradiation of mail going to government offices. That was because of his scientific expertise on the irradiation of food products.

(By the way, the irradiation process DID work and is still in use today on all incoming mail going to government offices in Washington, DC. Good work, Danny!)

He was also chosen by the State Department to be the scientist of choice when negotiating food trade agreements with countries all over the world! As a result, he did an amazing amount of travel in his career. I recall him having to fly to Japan in one week ... TWICE!

Anyway, when he finally decided to retire after forty years of government service and most of our friends recovered from the shock that he would do such a thing (remember my Danny's reputation of a lovable workaholic?), we moved to Tucson for a slower paced (and warmer) life.

Danny's notoriety must have preceded him because of what occurred at the first neighborhood gathering we went to. We had no sooner come through the front door when a new neighbor came up to him and said, "Oh! Another PIP!" We had no idea what she was talking about. "PIP? What's a PIP?" She flatly stated, "Previously Important Person."

Ouch!

Prior to coming to Tucson, when we moved in together in Washington, DC, we also had our surprises when meeting the new neighbors.

Danny and I had purchased a house in an older, predominantly African American neighborhood. We seemed to be part of the gentrification that was happening all over DC at the time. Although our neighbors were nice, they were a bit stand-offish. We were strangers in their midst!

Anyway, as I've said, Danny's parents regularly came for a visit every few years. Carroll (who always called me "Pal" ... I loved that!) and Oma ... and whomever else they brought with them ... would go sightseeing while Danny and I were at work. Then, we would all get together in the evening, have a great dinner cooked by Oma and play cards.

So on this visit, Danny and I dutifully went off to work and waved our good-byes. When we returned home, we were flabbergasted to see our front porch and yard filled with people we didn't know! Carroll had purchased a large ice chest and filled it with beer. He, then, proceeded to sit on our front porch and invite everyone who walked by to come up and join him in a brew!

We sure got to know our neighbors that day!

Carroll was a CHARACTER! He was funny and a little ornery at times. He also was extremely creative! He once painted their mailbox bright gold with curlicues. He liked it so well, he proceeded to do the same paint job on Oma's mother's upright piano, which Gramma Siddens has given to the kids!

Oma was not impressed.

Every time he came to visit us, he would see some wooden object we had purchased at an antique store or craft fair and say, "[curse word, curse word] How much did that cost? I could make it myself!"

And he could have!

He eventually whittled five Santa Clauses for us, each standing about eight inches tall; all painted with different expressions and demeanors. My favorite is the Santa with his bare butt hanging out of his red long underwear.

Carroll was quite a kidder as well!

Like all farm kids, Danny and his siblings all belonged to 4-H. You had to be nine years old in order to go to the 4-H Camp that was held every summer. It was decided, because Danny's brother David would turn nine the year after Danny, Carroll and Oma would hold Danny back from going for one year, so that he and David could go to Camp for the first time together.

However, Carroll, having the experience of going before, told his boys that toilet paper was limited at Camp and they could only use three squares whenever they had to

go to the bathroom. THREE SQUARES! Then he made them PRACTICE at home before they went to Camp. Those little boys did their darnedest!

Of course, when they got there, they found out they had unlimited toilet paper!! Their own father had pulled one over on them!!!

Now, 4-H played a HUGE part in their lives, as it does with all farm kids across the country. It was a lot of fun and hard work to bring up a cow or pig from the time it was born until it was time to show at the county fair. Those kids were with those animals so much, they became their pets. And, of course, the goal was to get a blue ribbon when the judging came around.

Even though most city folks may be aware of that part of the story, what they don't know is ... after the fair is over and the ribbons have been handed out, those pets are slaughtered and sliced up into cuts of meat. Danny's family did their own slaughtering. (We even still have some of the tools that were used ... "Take THAT you intruder!") THEN, on their birthdays or special occasions, it was an honor for one of the kids to be able to choose whose hunk of pet they were going to eat for dinner! They had a big coffin-style freezer that was sectioned off in four parts; one for each child. If it was Danny's "day", he, happily, would pull out something labeled "Danny 's Betsy's Rump Roast" to share with everyone at the celebration.

Yum!

(Anybody feel like a steak?!)

When it came time for Danny to go off to college, the family decided to sell the livestock. That was because, up to that point, Danny had been the primary caretaker of the animals. They were, eventually, able to sell off all the beasties except for a few chickens. However, just before it was time for Danny to go away, the State Police brought a bunch of roosters and hens to their farm.

You see, when a cock-fighting ring was broken up somewhere in the state of Illinois, the poor animals would be brought to the Engeljohn farm for sorting out and general care. That was because Carroll was a Civil Defense Officer. That meant the authorities could trust him not to do something nefarious with the birds.

Now they were in a conundrum! With Danny going away for the initial week of college orientation, someone needed to collect the eggs of the assorted hens that just arrived. Danny got his sisters to agree to collect the eggs for the week or so he would be away. Well, apparently, the first time the girls tried to get the eggs from these "wild" hens, they got pecked so badly, they refused to do it again. So, they devised a ruse. Over the next days, they procured eggs from their neighbors or went out and actually bought them. Then they put the eggs in the usual basket and, each day, dutifully gave it to their mother.

By the time Danny got home, they were overrun with fertile eggs and baby chicks! Now they had even MORE poultry than when they started!

So much for selling all the livestock.

Anyway, he had a great time growing up on the farm. From riding their horses bareback around the fields to great family gatherings, Danny is a product of his rearing. I, as a suburban baby, may not always be able to relate to some of his adventures, and even get a little squeamish when they are recalled, but I always laugh out loud when I hear these tales again.

I truly appreciate the person those experiences created and the guy from the farm whom I am in love with today!

Hey! Anyone want some of Porky's Snout?

Tenderfoot

Life With Fruma

I know some of you are asking yourselves, “What’s a Fruma?”

Well ... Fruma is the short name for a character in “Fiddler on the Roof”. Her full character name is Fruma Sarah. She appears once in a fabricated “dream sequence” by the lead character, Tevye. She is always depicted as a hag and tormentor.

Fruma is also the nickname of a man. (Yes, a man.)

Bill Campbell got that sobriquet because, even though he was a lighting designer, he once had to go onstage as Fruma Sarah when the actress playing her suddenly fell ill and there was no one else available to fill in. Apparently, his enthusiastic performance was such a notable crowd-pleaser, the appellation stuck.

Fruma was one of those people that, when you met him, you never forgot him. First of all, he was clever. His sense of humor always led to his own unmistakable howl and giggle. It was as if he was laughing at himself in order to out-laugh you. He was smart; NOTHING got by him. He was ready to comment on anything that got within 25 feet of him. He was creative; a designer, performer, theatre manager and artist, with a great eye for detail. He could be biiiitchy (no description needed); and he drank TOO much. Fruma was one of those “old school queens” who wielded his cigarette and cocktail like weapons; punctuating his tirades with a sudden smoky inhale and a clink of his ice cubes.

Fruma stood about 5’10”, and was lanky, except for a bit of a belly ... which was created more from bourbon than beer. He had black curly hair and a high forehead that belied his thinning locks. He had an oddly crooked nose that he hid with HUGE glasses.

Yes, he may have appeared to strangers as a larger-than-life character, but I knew him as a sincere, passionate artist who cared DEEPLY for the people he knew and the matters at hand.

We never were lovers and always remained close friends. And it was Fruma who became one of those guideposts who helped change the trajectory of my life.

I met Fruma in Lexington, Kentucky in spring of 1977. I was working at a dinner theatre acting in “Jesus Christ, Superstar” (... at a DINNER THEATRE! I’ve always thought crucifixion improved the appetite ... sheesh!).

At the time, Fruma was one of the managers of a summer theatre called Jenny Wiley Summer Music Theatre in Prestonsburg in far eastern Kentucky. His theatre had not finished casting their summer season because the person in charge died during the audition period. Fruma had been her assistant. So, with their season opening in a matter of weeks, he was scrambling to find actors to fill some still vacant roles. He had come to the theatre where I was working to “pick from the buffet”. If

memory serves (memory ... what's that?), Fruma offered three of us roles for Jenny Wiley's last two shows: "Oliver!" and "Camelot". I was going to be a dancer in the first and would play Mordred in the second. I had no prospects for the summer, so, lucky for me, it worked out well.

Prestonsburg was located next to Jenny Wiley State Park, smack in the middle of Appalachia. Beautiful country ... but faaaar from civilization. And I mean REALLY far! It was hill country, boy! And in 1977, it was particularly isolated. There, now, is an interstate, but, at that time, it was "take me home, country road".

The State Park had an outdoor stage situated in a natural amphitheater. Although, the dressing rooms and costume shop were covered by a roof, the stage and the seats were lying under God's great open expanse. The theatre had a policy, which stated, if it rained after the first act had been completed, but the show had not yet finished, they didn't have to give a refund to the patrons. So, as actors, if rain threatened during the first act, word quickly spread that we were in "rain tempo"; meaning "perform-as-fast-as-you-can-to-get-to-intermission". Intermission happens, no refunds.

The actors' residences was split between two separate houses; one for the men and one for the women. AFTERALL, this was the Bible Belt. The girls were in town, relatively close to the Park. But the guys were housed waaaaay up in the hills somewhere. It was so far away, you couldn't see ANY signs of civilization.

The fellas were assigned an ooold Victorian hulk of a building. Now, because I arrived late to the season, all the bedrooms had already been taken. I WAS given my own room, however ... on a mattress on the floor in the DINING ROOM! (Lovely.)

There was one day when I was alone in the house because everyone was down at the theatre doing the matinee for the show I wasn't cast in. There was a creaky upright piano in the living room. Being self-taught, I never played the piano when anyone was around, so I took advantage of my isolation and began playing "The Moonlight Sonata". Suddenly, I heard the front door open behind me. In walked the kid from the movie "Deliverance".

Now for those of you who have never seen the film, the main characters are in the back hills and encounter a child who, obviously, is a product of WAY too much inbreeding; misshapen head, odd looking eyes, almost albino in color. This is who walked, unannounced, into the room where I was seated.

I, warily, said a "hello", but he didn't respond. I thought, "Uh oh". So then I asked, "Do you like the music?" and he nodded "yes". From where I was at the piano, I quickly scanned him to make sure he wasn't carrying any weapons. Satisfied, I turned my back to him and began to play. He came closer and stood just over my shoulder. I could sense him just standing there. So, I told him he could sit down, if he wanted. But he didn't

move. He just stood and listened. SO ... I played through the sonata a couple more times then, nervously, moved onto the few other songs I knew. I got thinking to myself, "What happens when I run out of songs?". However, at that moment, almost as if he read my mind, he walked to the front door and left.

I LEAPT to the door, slammed it shut and LOCKED IT!

The hills were alive but it wasn't going to be with the sound of my music!!

As the summer was winding down, I didn't know where I would go next. I was thinking I would probably end up back with my parents in Schenectady. But, good ol' Fruma stepped in again and cleared the path for my next adventure.

Fruma had a loft apartment in New York City that he shared with three other people; two, of whom, were also out of town for the summer. They all had been sending their shares of the rent and utility money to the remaining roommate. It turned out, for some unsavory reason, that fella decided it would be a good idea if he pocketed that money and not pay the landlord or the utilities. When one of the other roomies returned to the apartment and found an eviction notice, all hell broke loose. Fruma and the other two immediately kicked the ne'er-do-well out. But now, they not only had to come up with the back rent, they needed a replacement roommate. Hence, little me! Fruma knew I wanted to move to New York some day, but simply didn't have the wherewithal to do it. He convinced me this was the perfect opportunity because I wouldn't need to look for an apartment. His logic made sense ... soooo, thanks to La Fruma, I made the plunge and moved to New York City. It was August 31, 1977.

The apartment was smack in the middle of Greenwich Village. It turned out it was a loft with really high ceilings and floor to ceiling windows. However, it was in a commercially zoned building; meaning, no one was SUPPOSED to be actually living there. The landlord was renting the apartments out ILLEGALLY!

A quirk with living in a commercial building was there was NO heat and NO hot water on the weekends!!! Can you imagine what it was like sitting on the john in the middle of a New York winter???? (Go ahead, I'll wait ...)

The great thing about it was those windows. It really appealed to the voyeur in me. I could sit at the kitchen counter, eating breakfast and wake up in the morning to the naked neighbors across the way. I remember there was a woman who only had red lights and often walked around nude. There were also two guys who I never figured out what they were up to. Every other evening they would strip off all their clothes and, what seemed to me, rehearsed scenes with scripts in their hands.

Ahhh, New York.

One of my new roommates was Susan. She was the manager of the phone room at the Royale Theatre on Broadway which, at that time, was selling tickets for the show

“Grease”. She hired me to work the phones when I was really struggling to find employment, not to mention finding funds to buy food!

(Thank you, Susan. Thank you, Fruma!)

It was also Fruma who took me to my first gay bar in New York. Now, mind you, this was pre-AIDS, so anything and everything was available for your particular proclivities.. To his credit, Fruma only frequented piano bars, which definitely appealed to a more civilized clientele. However, let’s just say, at that time in Greenwich Village, if you wanted “it”, you could have “it”. Thank goodness, at that BRIEF period in my life, I didn’t even know what “it” was!

When the authorities finally caught wind of our illegitimate housing, we got booted. At least we were given enough notice to make arrangements for other ... well ... arrangements.

It was decided that Fruma and I would find someplace of our own. However, Fruma got hired to do the lights and be stage manager for a touring mime company (yes, I said mime company) and had to leave town! So, unworldly me got the job of finding us an apartment ... that we could AFFORD!!! (Ugh!) But I did it! It took me having to look at some of the worst ratholes one could imagine (“It just needs a little cleaning.”), but I found a one bedroom with parquet floors and a fireplace just off of Washington Square Park, near NYU. And we could afford it!

It was dirty, but, as we were both good, detail-orientated personalities (can you say, “prissy?”), we cleaned it up.

To clean the oven, I took it apart ... no, I mean I REALLY unscrewed the apparatus holding it together and TOOK IT APART! I laid out all the pieces on newspaper and “oven-cleanered” the heck out of it. (OCD can be your friend!)

This was then followed by Fruma getting down on his hands and knees and stripping the floors. Then, nightly, with cigarette dangling from his lips, he re-finished the floor, lovingly brushing on the polyurethane and sliding his cocktail glass along the floor beside him as he moved.

Fond memories.

I “left” Fruma when one of my best friends from college, Leslie, decided to move to New York as well. Fruma and I, in the meantime, had a mutual friend move in with us, so I knew, if I moved in with Leslie, I wouldn’t be abandoning him ... at least financially.

Even though we no longer lived with each other, Fruma and I stayed “besties” throughout the years.

And it was Fruma who, a few years later, once again, steered me toward the path I was “supposed to” take.

When I decided to moved out of New York, I WAS going to move to Boston.

I had “given up the ghost” on my stage career, but I knew I wanted to stay in an urban area and East Coast-ish. I settled on Boston because I had family near there and I had a friend who worked for TicketMaster whom I knew would give me a job.

HOWEVER, before making the move ...

That summer of 1988, Leslie received a job doing summer stock and was going to be out of town. We were no longer living with each other, but were still pals. She sublet her apartment to an acquaintance of ours and asked me to oversee the arrangement, collect/deposit her rent and pickup her mail..

So, once or twice a month I would go over when, Rick (her sublettee) was in. It turned out Rick was planning to move out of NYC as well, only he was going to DC. His brother lived there. Plus Rick had lived there years before when he danced with The Washington Ballet. He asked me if I had ever considered moving to DC. If I did, we could move together and share expenses.

I thought about it, but only knew one person in DC. It was my first roomie and old buddy, Fruma. He had left New York a few years before and was now the Assistant Manager of the ticketing phone room at the Kennedy Center. I called him to see if they were hiring. He said, “Get down here right now!” There had just been some kind of scandal in the phone room where some employees were stealing money. The culprits were all fired and Fruma was extremely short-handed.

I moved there within the month.

(As a piece of trivia, I left New York on August 31, 1988; eleven years to the day from when I moved there.)

Once again, thanks to Fruma, my life turned on a dime which led me to the amazing journey I have been on since.

Sadly, we lost sweet Fruma about fifteen years ago. He fell in his apartment and hit his head. His journey was over.

He had such a huge influence on my life! He was a major beacon that called out to me, saying, “This way!” Two of the biggest decisions of my life, my moves to New York City and to Washington, DC, were due to him.

Wherever he is, I still can say to him, “I love you, Fruma ... and I truly thank you.”

So, here’s to our guiding spirits, here or beyond! They are always with us, if nothing else, in our memories.

With Love,
A fellow traveler

It's a livin'

Now that I am thinking about my time in New York City, I can't help but look back on the WACKY jobs I had while I lived there. And if the jobs themselves weren't crazy, some of the situations or circumstances surrounding them were.

I know, I know ... EVERYBODY has had a job or two in their past they point to and say, "I can't believe I did that". Well, here are a few of my "I can't believe I did that" occupations while doing time in Manhattan.

Of course, as an actor, my opportunities waxed and waned as my theatre jobs came and went. There were always times of boom and bust. But, when I was busted, I was desperate! Little ol' New York isn't little ol' cheap!

When I first moved there with Fruma, I had a little money saved from my theatre jobs. However, budgetary shock quickly set in. Hoo boy, did my nest egg disappear fast! The inevitable lack of money came so quickly, I was poor before I even realized I was poor!

Now ... as an aside ... I have to do a little back-patting here. I ALWAYS paid my bills, including a college loan that, at the time, was sucking the life's blood out of me. I paid up before I ate; which had its own peccadillos.

It was when I found myself searching the cushions in the apartment furniture and the curbside gutters along the streets for pennies, so I could find 13 cents to buy a potato for dinner, I KNEW I had to face the music and get some income flowing.

I have to say, I was (and still can be) an idiot sometimes. I was SO embarrassed by the whole thing, I didn't tell anyone of my predicament, not even La Fruma. I'm sure my roomies would have told me I was ridiculous and then donated funds or food to me. But, not me. Pride was my fall.

And they never found out because, due to everyone's different schedules, none of us ate together.

Fruma's idea of food was to make a GIGANTIC tuna noodle casserole at the beginning of the week and pick at it for all three meals each day until it was gone. Then he would simply make another one. And, I do confess, there were times when I took little mouse bites out of it, hoping he wouldn't notice.

(I was hungry!)

Anyway, my job search began.

My very first employment was waiting tables at a burger and brew joint in Times Square.

Now, to show you how desperate I was, if you remember, I had psychological scars from waiting tables at Gaslight Village a few years before. Serving cantankerous tourists eight hours a day, left its mark, belieeeeve you me!

But ... there I was in a TIMES SQUARE dump; from 11:00 at night until 4:00 in the morning!!! And remember, I was just a babe in the woods at this point of my life. Times Square, for Pete's sake!

On my first night, they put me on "the floor" with absolutely NO training.

N-o-n-e.

I didn't even know where to get extra silverware! Plus, the place was so dimly lit, I could barely see my order pad. The other waiters were surly and the cook was just plain mean. I walked out and never went back ... not even to get my "HUGE" pay check! Funny thing was, when I didn't go back, they never called me to see where I was. I guess the feeling was mutual.

Then, as if I hadn't had enough distress, I got ANOTHER job waiting tables in Greenwich Village at a place called "Four and Twenty Pies". They served diner food and ... pies ... 24/7. Thankfully, this time, I worked the dinner hours.

Although, I'll tell ya, even that place had its downfall.

One night a woman came in for just coffee and a piece of pie. When I gave her the check, she told me she would pay me by reading my palm ... ! ("Oh, great!") I told her we only took cash. That's when she told me she was a gypsy witch and would put a curse on me.

I got my manager.

There is something about a coffee and pie shop in the middle of Greenwich Village that attracts the most interesting people.

I left there after three weeks.

It was then that my roomie, Susan, had a job opening at her work and hired me to sell tickets over the phone at The Royale Theatre on Broadway. ("Grease Telecharge. Please hold!")

At least the money was good and the hours were flexible.

After about two years, I ended leaving the phone job because I was cast in a show; albeit out of town, but it was a show!

However, as I've said, there was always an ebb and flow of money and jobs; both theatre and "civilian".

There was one job that I got through a temp agency in which I was SURE the Feds were going to swoop in and arrest everybody. It was at the Israel Histadrut Foundation. My job was to type up contractual agreements for private citizens. The agreements were

essentially Wills for people where, upon their deaths, the entirety of their estates would be transferred to the government of Israel. I am talking about MILLIONS of dollars. I concede, out of fear of being raided, I typed as slowly as I could. I figured the less contracts I generated, the less I would be penalized for being an accomplice.

That lasted about two weeks.

I did have a GREAT job in the mid 80's, though. I was a delivery boy! (I know you are wondering, "What?? Has he lost his mind?")

Well, in the olden times, back before personal computers, magazines didn't generate the printed form the public would eventually see in the magazine's finished product. It was all done off-site by separate Linotype companies. The Linotype machine looked like a pipe organ, except the musical keyboard was replaced by a typewriter keyboard. WAY back in the day, Linotypes spit out letters on metal plates. Newspapers used them. However, this "new" and "modern" version printed the letters on photographic paper. The finished material was delivered (by me) up to the magazine office, where, in turn, the magazine would send back the next batch of needed copy with the delivery boy (still me). I received \$25 for EVERY envelope I delivered and \$25 for EVERY envelope I brought back. I would always have two to four envelopes in one trip and make two to four trips in one day. Holy maloly, the money added up fast! As a matter of fact, I made so many trips, I got to know one of the secretaries at Atlantic Magazine so well, I sang at her wedding!

Otherwise, while I was hanging around waiting for the next assignment, I would read or listen to the radio or simply nap.

But, all good things come to an end. When desktop computers came into being, the entire Linotype industry collapsed.

Goodbye, career as a delivery boy.

But, I think the looniest job I ever had was delivering seltzer water to private citizens and restaurants all over the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

An acquaintance of mine, who was a performer in the mime company Fruma worked for, was going out of town on tour for the summer. His DAY job was the above aforementioned seltzer water delivery gig.

He asked me if I had anything to do that summer.

"No".

Did I have a driver's license?

"Yes."

Would I want to temporarily take over for him and deliver seltzer for the summer?

"No. But ..."

CRAP! I was at a point where I needed a job again, so ... I reluctantly agreed.

Oh lawdy!! I had to get up at 4:30 in the MORNING and take a TWO hour subway ride waaaaay out to the farthest reaches of Brooklyn. I had to pick up the van I would be driving. It was then I received a computer printout indicating my destinations for that day.

Now, mind you, it was the early 1980's. The printout was a blurry, dot matrix sheet with perforated strips on the side that fell off at the slightest touch. I could barely read the thing, especially when the letters drifted onto the perforated part. There were times I just guessed where I was supposed to go.

THEN, I had to load up the van with the same number of cases as the assigned deliveries for that day (plus a few extra, juuuuust in case).

Now, I want you to picture what I was loading ONTO this van. The seltzer bottles were not the 16oz plastic jugs you see in stores today. They were the heavy duty glass and metal contraptions you see in Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers movies from the thirties and forties. ("Ya want a splash with that?" Shplish!) A filled one weighed about three pounds. There were SIX in a case. The case itself was solid wood. Which MEANS (do your math), each case weighed around 23 pounds; and I had 50 to 60 deliveries every day!

After loading up the van, I had to drive back into Manhattan to begin my deliveries by about 9:00am. Now it became a game of figuring out what my destinations were and where the HECK I was going to park, while all the time fighting New York traffic!

But it wasn't over when I finished. I still had to slog through the rush hour mess to get back to the warehouse in Brooklyn to "dump" the van and then, finally, take the two hour train ride to my apartment in Manhattan.

Oy!

There werrrre a couple of "uh ohs" that summer, however.

The first happened when I began to get used to the job. I got cocky and, instead of using the hand truck to wheel the case up to some lady's third floor walk up apartment, I decided to heft it onto my right shoulder and carry it up the stairs. Just as I neared her floor, I realized I had overreached my stamina ... the case slipped backward off my shoulder and six glass and metal seltzer bottles and accompanying wooden crate went crashing back down the stairway.

Oops.

The noise was unbelievable. Everyone opened their doors to see what bomb exploded. They only saw me frozen on the stairs, sheepishly smiling at them.

Thank goodness the lady, who I was delivering to, was incredibly sympathetic. She gave me a mop, broom and trash can to clean everything up. I was also lucky to have one extra case in the van.

I used the hand truck.

The other time was when I got stuck in an underground parking garage. I had wedged the van in between two support girders, but couldn't get it back out from betwixt them. I inched forward and back, forward and back. That is until I heard a c-r-u-n-c-h!

Oops.

(The following is yet another of my "Forgive me, father, for I have sinned. Please hear my confession".)

The next time I saw the manager of the seltzer water company at the warehouse, he asked me about "that dent in the van!"

As when I whacked the old lady a few years later, I figuratively hid under the desk. I just looked at him blankly and said, "I don't know."

(I can already smell the brimstone.)

The only good thing I can say about that job is ... because I had started to lift weights a few months prior to that, by the time that summer was over, I was quite buff.

(Thank you!)

Anyway ...

Not having money all the time isn't always such a bad thing. I remember one Christmas when one of my later roommates, Leslie, and I were both down on our luck. We had no extra money for presents or decorations. But, instead, we made oatmeal cookies for all our friends and family. And then, we found a sad little "Charlie Brown" tree which we took home and decorated with popcorn strings, paper chains and homemade ornaments made from leftover yarn my mother gave me. It was one of the most special Christmases I can remember. And, to this day, I still decorate Danny's and my tree with the little yarn mouse and elephant I made all those years ago.

They remind me to count my blessings when I have them. And to be resilient when I don't. Because good times are always just around the corner...

... just not on the Upper East Side of Manhattan ... in rush hour traffic.

God Bless us, everyone.

Tiny Steve

Chicken dinner

So then there was the time I was invited to an orgy. I didn't know it was an orgy. NOT that I participated, mind you. (Making THAT clear to the masses!) I was just an invitee.

Yep. A real live, debauched, no-holds-barred, butts in the air, really gross to look at, bacchanalian orgy.

However, in a fit of a social faux pas, somehow, the host neglected to tell me that was what I was being invited to. He only told me it was dinner with some friends. In retrospect, those must have been some REALLY close friends.

Before I really get into this particular yarn, I want to make sure you know I will not be using anyone's real name here. That is, except for some better known people who were NOT involved in these shenanigans... and, of course, my own. Why further sully someone's already sullied reputation ... especially when they have passed on and are certainly being sullied in the Hereafter?

As I've said, I moved to New York City in 1977, which would have put me at 23 years old.

For those of you not versed in urban lingo, someone in their teens or early twenties who are particularly unversed in the ways of the world are crudely referred to as "chicken". Well, being that I had only just graduated from college the year before, and even though I had a few years of summer theatre under my belt, I would definitely describe my worldly ways as being in the "poultry" category.

As you know, an early job for me was answering phones and selling tickets for the Broadway show "Grease". One day, one of Joe Papp's personal assistants came to speak to our House Manager about theatre stuff.

(Youses in the know, already are keenly aware of Joe Papp's contributions as a producer and innovator of New York theatre as it has come to be known today. His most famous accomplishments are producing "A Chorus Line" and creating Shakespeare in the Park.)

Well, after "Dean" was finished with his meeting with the manager, he crossed the hall to our office in order to yak with Marge, who handled the mailed order requests that were processed in the phone room. They had worked together at some point and remained friends. He was introduced to me and after "chatting me up" a bit, asked me if I wanted to go out to eat some night.

So, we followed through one evening, having a nice time with him regaling me tales of his time at Joe Papp's office. It was a pleasant evening with promises of meeting up again.

A few days later, he called me at work and told me (here we go), "Some friends were coming over to his apartment for a dinner party on Saturday night. Would I like to join them?"

Suuuure! Why not? It would fun to meet some of his co-workers. I was also thinking, maybe I could even snag some contacts into the Papp Organization for some future stage work. I was excited ... and really, reeeally naive.

I showed up at his apartment near NYU at the appointed time. It was a cold night and had just begun to snow. I was wearing a heavy coat I loved which I had just purchased at a second-hand store. I was glad to have an opportunity to wear it and show it off a bit.

Anyway, when I knocked on his third floor apartment door, at first, no one answered. I thought that was odd, but I just kept rapping until it opened. Instead of "Dean", I was greeted by a thinning man in his late thirties completely dressed in leather. (Hello!) He was very cordial and led me to a large bedroom to my left where I put my coat and hat.

"Dean's" apartment was actually two apartments in which a dividing wall had been removed, making his space cavernous and meandering with lots of hallways and many rooms. I noticed that there were hardly any lights on and, in fact, there were some places in the hallway where there was no light at ALL.

Weaving through the darkened labyrinth, the leather guy led me to the other side of the apartment into a brightened room that was a combination kitchen/dining/sitting area. "Dean" was there to greet me. There was a table bursting with food against one wall and a few men in their 30's and 40's sitting on the floor (!) talking amongst themselves in small groupings of two to four. "Dean" gregariously greeted me, telling me a few more folks were coming, but to help myself to any food or drink and make myself comfortable. At that, he bolted out the blackened doorway, back into the hall.

I never saw him again.

Well, I looked around, trying to locate a friendly face, but was only met with vague glances of disinterest or no acknowledgement at all.

This felt weird.

It also seemed odd to me that (a) for a dinner party, no one was actually eating and (b) no one was hardly there. For a "party", there were only a scant six to eight people. I also took note they were all in leather or black denim and in various states of undress.

That's odd ...

But, cluelessly, I soldiered on, filling a plate with food. Grabbing a soda, I crossed the room, stepping around some of the other “guests” and found a small sofa on the far side of the room set in a cranny in the wall. Smiling inanely, I silently chowed down.

To my left was a tall night stand of some kind with a Super-8, reel-to-reel projector with a reel of film already setup in it. “Oh!”, I thought, “He’s going to show a movie!”

That was nice.

(Young’un’s! In 1977, they ... no, not the weather people ... had not yet come out with an affordable VCR for the masses.)

As I sat there, I noticed that I was definitely the youngest person in the room. Everyone was in their thirties or above. And I certainly wasn’t dressed like them. (I must have left my polished latex chaps at home, darn it!)

After a short time, another young guy about my age stumbled into the room, looking around and seemed as confused as I was. The leather guy had escorted him in as well and abandoned him as fast as he had me. He also seemed as at sea as I was feeling. He obviously relaxed when we locked eyes and I gave him a little wave. He stepped over the uninterested men on the floor and hurried over to where I sat and plopped down next to me.

His name was “Greg” and he was interning at the Papp Organization. “Dean” had invited him over, even though “Greg” didn’t know him very well. We, then, gratefully unloaded our anxieties by launching into our “isn’t this weird?” and “this is the strangest” dinner party either of us had ever been to.

By that time, about an hour and a half had passed since the time we had been told to arrive. Suddenly a LOT more men started to arrive. Within the half hour the room grew very crowded. Everyone sat on the floor or draped themselves on what sparse furniture there was. Oddly, they all seemed to have some item or items of leather as part of their collective accoutrements. And they were all men.

Unnervingly, “Greg” and I were definitely the youngest ones in the room.

Suddenly the lights went out.

Someone turned the projector on next to us.

Instead of “The Wizard of Oz”, it was raw, grimy gay porn!!! And it was being projected over our laps onto the wall to our right.

It was then we realized, we weren’t invited TO dinner. We WERE dinner!!!!

We had to get out of there FAST.

Our first dilemma was that we were “pinned” to the sofa by the debauchery being shown across our laps. “Greg” devised that if we both leapt up together as a solid unit,

the film would be interrupted only for a second. We could then barrel our way to the bedroom, get our coats and flee out of there.

The problem was, where the HECK was the bedroom??? It was on the other side of the apartment!! We had both been led through a maze of blackness. "Greg" thought he MIGHT be able to figure it out. Still, we had the mass of writhing bodies yet to climb over between us and the door.

I said, "Just step on 'em!!!" (By this time, I felt this was a matter of us or them.)

So, on "One! Two! Three!", we leapt to our feet and made our encumbered escape toward the door in front of us. We could barely tell where we were stepping. We could only see by the light of the film. And, by now, the mass beneath our feet was a writhing entity of moans and movement. What I could see was ... well ... not something one wants to make polite conversation about. ("Auntie Sophie! Let me tell you about the time I ...")

Ick!

When we made it to the darkened door to the hallway, there was NO light at all! It was like a carnival funhouse; only this was NOT fun!!! Feeling our way through, we encountered more "bodies" and actually had to pull away from a few grasping arms. It was something out of a horror movie!

The bedroom with the coats was up ahead. I could see the bed laden with outer garments because the windows had no blinds and the streetlight was coming in like a haven in the wilderness. I RAN ahead and promptly tripped and fell flat on my face. The streetlight has not revealed the mattresses that had been placed around the floor of the room in our absence. God only knows what they were put there for.

By this time, we were hysterical! And I MEAN hysterical. We were laughing and frightened and crying and just beside ourselves.

I remember leaping on the pile of coats and hurling gear EVERYWHERE. Because I was one of the first to arrive, my beautiful new coat was now somewhere on the bottom of that heap; and I was NOT going to leave there without it!

"Greg" somehow found his coat first and was waiting near the bedroom door for me.

Finally, grabbing mine, we moon-bounced across the mattresses to the hall and to the door to the apartment.

However ...

Leather guy was blocking the door with his arms crossed saying, "Where do you think you're going?"

I would like you now to picture two rabid squirrels pouncing on an unsuspecting wildcat and tearing it to pieces."

We jumped on that poor man so hard, he didn't know what hit him. While "Greg" held him down, I clawed at the frame looking for the lock. IT WAS PITCH BLACK AND I COULDN'T SEE ANYTHING!!!

Scratching and whimpering, I finally found the lock and the latch! I wrenched open the door and we went screaming out into the hall. Not waiting for an elevator, we ran, laughing like lunatics all the way down the stairs.

When we reached the "safety" of the street, the snow was falling hard. It felt good ... as if it was the snow of Glinda, the Good Witch falling on Dorothy to cleanse her of The Wicked Witch's poison.

We hugged, turned away in opposite directions and never saw each other again.

There is an epilogue to this story.

"Dean" called me two days later to ask if I enjoyed myself. I told him he should have warned me. He just laughed and asked if we could see each other again.

I said, "No."

Today's lesson, boys and girls, is know with whom you are eating. They just might be dishing up a serving of chicken leg ... yours.

Older and somewhat wiser,

The Old Rooster

Movin' and a Groovin'

I moved a LOT in my life.

Yes, yes, yes ... I can hear all you military urchins out there challenging me the SECOND you read that opening salvo:

“You think you’ve moved a lot?? Well, we moved 152 times when I was growing up!”

“We moved so much, my family pictures are blurred.”

“ We moved so much, our sofa had road rash.”

“ We moved so much, my high school graduation was at a rest stop on the New Jersey Turnpike!”

(Bah-dah-boom!)

Okay, okay. You win. I concede. YOU moved more than I did.

Still ... I moved a LOT in my life.

Not so much in my early years. But, hoo boy golly, you decide to make your career on the stage and it becomes easy to forget where you are supposed to go home at night. (I guess that can happen for other reasons as well ... but that doesn't fit in with today's theme.)

Let's see, starting from the beginning (and not including the hospital where I was born) there were: (starting with my formative years) a couple of apartments in an old hotel, then the weathered farmhouse, then another house just before I went off to college. Different abodes for every year of college, not to mention my summer housing while doing summer stock at different theatres during those college years. Then, in my professional career, there were two more actors' houses in Kentucky before finally moving to New York City (NYC). Six apartments in NYC, with second homes at several regional and dinner theatres spread in between. Three houses in Washington, the cabin in West Virginia and finally ending with my FOREVER home in Tucson, Areezoner.

SO ... that would be ... 1, 2, 3 ... ummm ... I'm estimatin' it was about thirty-five to forty “home, sweet, homes” in which I lay down my little head for extended periods of time. (I've left out some one night stands ... but that, also, doesn't fit in with today's theme.)

My long suffering mother learned early on to write my address in pencil in her address book. Except for me, she was the only person on Earth who knew how to get in contact with me ... and even then, sometimes I was confused.

As a result of this wandering, gypsy life, I got pretty good at relocating on a dime.

Of course, when I first moved to NYC, it was a piece of cake; I had no furniture and hardly any worldly possessions. I waltzed in on a wing and a prayer.

After that, when I acquired more material things and began moving around, I relied on family and friends to help. But, as we know ALL too well, helping someone to move ranks right up there with getting an infected wisdom tooth pulled. I felt badly even asking.

Although there was an early move between apartments in NYC in which my poor father drove down from Schenectady. Me, my roomie Leslie, a friend Tim and my dad moved Leslie and I out of a fourth floor apartment (with an elevator, thank godliness!) into a second story walk up.

(An aside here: we got that place with the elevator for a reasonable rent. We had a key to a private park outside our front door. And Margaret Hamilton ... the Wicked Witch of the West ... lived in the building next door ... or so we were told.)

Anyway, we got everything out using said elevator, except our box springs and mattresses. They wouldn't fit in the elevator; was a teeny! So my dad parked the car below our apartment window and we lowered them down onto the car roof using ropes. (I've always wondered what the neighbors below us thought.) Then, we needed to drive about sixty blocks uptown to get to the new digs. But the car was SO packed and tied together with ropes, there was hardly no place to sit! The four of us had to squееееее into any spare space we could find.

I remember, dad was driving (of course), Leslie got to sit in what space was left in the passenger seat, while Tim ended up on the floor between her legs. I just laid across some boxes in the back seat. As we slowly rolled our way up Broadway, Tim began to quietly sing the opening theme to "The Beverly Hillbillies."

That would have been a knee slapper if I could have reached my knee.

As time went on and my moves became more frequent, I became too embarrassed to ask any friends for help. As a result, I became the "king of the luggage cart".

The luggage cart I am talking about is the flimsy kind made of metal tubing with the handle that pulls up and is secured with a plastic doohickey on a screw and a small platform that folds down.

I moved three times on the subway in Manhattan using just my little luggage cart. Of course that meant I had to take about twenty thousand trips to do it ... but I did it!

(Now that I am thinking of it, for the amount of money I spent on subway fare, I probably could have rented a truck!)

But it was the CHALLENGE that appealed to me! My little puzzle brain would go into overload. I became an "expert" on how to disguise a 28" television set (you know, those humongous ones before flatscreens) so that it looked like a pile of blankets. Oh, I

was so pleased with myself when I reached my destination without anyone mugging me for want of my precious TV!

Although, I truly pushed the limits with my last move in NYC. I went from a six floor walk up (no elevator) to another six floor walk up (no elevator). All I can say is, there is something about the stamina of youth that has its advantages ... ya know?

Moving to Washington wasn't too bad because my soon-to-be roommate, Rick, and I split the cost of a rental truck. The big problem was when we got to DC.

Even though we were going into a building with an elevator, in order to get to the apartment itself, you had to walk the length of approximately fifteen football fields worth of hallway. We arrived at about nine in the evening after moving out of both our places in NYC that morning and taking about a five hour drive. We STILL needed to unload the truck in order to get it to the rental company, lest we be penalized.

Fruma, said he would help, but got hung up with a problem at work. So, it was just Rick and I and a truck full of two apartments worth of paraphernalia! As I just said, there is something about the stamina of youth ...!

Now, when my darling Danny and I moved in together, we rented a truck, but we had a group of willing friends to help us; a wild and crazy bunch that actually OFFERED their assistance!

Anyway, early that morning, we had carted Danny's stuff out of his apartment in Virginia as well as moved my measly possessions out of my second house in DC (which was across the street from what would become our home of 30 years). I had to be at work at 1:00 that afternoon, so I left the guys about noon, with them still unloading the truck into our new house.

When I returned at 9:30 that night, I arrived expecting to see piles of cartons and debris everywhere. Instead, I walked into an immaculate house; ALL the furniture in place, EVERY box unpacked and the beds were MADE! Even the pictures were HUNG ON THE WALL!

All I can say is ... when my darling Danny wants something done, it gets done! Over the years, I have learned, when he is in that mindset, to get out of his way! Knowing what I know now, I'm glad I wasn't there when it was happening. But, I'll tell ya, it was a delightful surprise to come home to!

SO!

When it came time to make this last move to Areezoner, we decided to be grown-ups. We felt we had earned it. We hired an upscale moving company to transport our precious belongings ALLLLL the way across the country. We chose a mover who was advertised on NPR, for goodness sake! They moved government muckety-mucks to their various assignments throughout the world.

WHAT could go wrong?

We should have been suspicious when the driver, who was the man in charge of our move, kept moving back the day of his arrival in Tucson with our furniture. When I finally reached him on the phone, he told me his father was sick in Mexico and he needed to go see him. (“... WITH MY FURNITURE??”) He assured me that was not the case. (hm!) I spoke to the main office several times, but even they didn’t know what was going on. The guy finally showed up even later than he said he would, with his BROTHER who he had picked up somewhere along the way. We were promised “professional movers”. This guy was “joe-blow” from the street. Thankfully, the company had provided two pros from the Tucson area to assist ... but they were “pissed off” (to coin a phrase.). They had been waiting around the same as we had. Let’s just say, there was tension “in the house”.

After a long process of unloading with the brother getting in the way more than helping, they all rushed off with hardly an adios.

It was then we realized how many pieces were damaged or broken or even MISSING! We speculated that he HAD gone “South of the Border” with our possessions and had a traffic mishap. SOMETHING went wrong.

Yes, I had a FEW interesting exchanges with the company. In the end, they gave us a paltry compensation, but it really didn’t cover the full extent of the damages. However, we were sick of the whole thing and ultimately let it drop.

So what’s the point here?

Over my MANY years of hithering and yonning, I found that sometimes utilizing ones wits can be more gratifying than relying on the witless. Unfortunately, using a stranger can lead to being used ... ya just need to know who your dealing with.

Of course, that doesn’t mean I won’t need to look to professional help in the future. But with my intention of never moving again, that “professional help” will involve its more traditional meaning.

(... which, also, doesn’t fit in with today’s theme ... or maybe it does ...)

Home at last.

Poor Wandering One

In a cabin in the woods ...

Yes, my darling Danny and I owned a cabin with five acres in the mountains of West Virginia. To me, the most amazing thing about it was that it was the second house I owned! And what was even MORE extraordinary was that I still owned the FIRST house. I NEVER thought I'd own any home, much less TWO!!

I'd like to remind you, I grew up kind-a po'. (Oh, really?) The only way my parents were able to buy a house was because my father was able to get a veterans' loan. But they weren't able to procure it until after MANY years of renting. That, and the fact that the thing only cost \$21,500 helped. Location, location, location, folks! (I can see the hordes streaming into Schenectady now. "GIMME THAT HOUSE!!!").

So, it was true, my very opulent life of glamour and privilege expanded in 2002, when the Cupo/Engeljohn household (The Cupojohns) purchased their manse in the glittering West Virginia hills ... for the about same price as you would pay for a car. (As I just said, "Location, location, location").

It wasn't that we were LOOKING to buy a vacation-type dwelling. It just kind-a ... well ... happened!

We had been going to this teeeeeny town (No, not town, village. No, what's smaller than a village? Hamlet! No, that's a play by Shakespeare. I know! DOT.) ... we had been going to this teeeeeeeny DOT in WV called Lost River. The REASON we had started visiting there was because of our friends, Jim Morris and Cynthia Hightower. They would regularly host a birthday bash in August on the small farm they owned, and a group of us'ns would drive up there for the hoopla.

Lost River was a picture perfect little DOT tucked into a beautifully narrow valley between two mountain ridges. It was demarcated by a post office, a church, a few homes and a general store, surrounded by gorgeous farmland. Oh, and there was the obligatory pizza/strip joint, but that was in a nondescript building and nobody talked about it.

Jim and Cynthia's Lilliputian sized farm was only about a 1/2 mile away from a great diner to the left and a beautifully restored farm house turned bed and breakfast with a urban-styled general store about a 1/2 mile to the right. It was there, in that bed and breakfast, where our group of friends would stay. Danny and I always bunked in a small detached building that had once housed the icehouse. It was a beautiful bedroom and we LOVED it!

The B & B was owned by a wonderful, artistic lesbian couple named Ann and Margo. They always made us all feel wildly comfortable. When we went there, the usual itinerary would be: Margo and Ann would feed us a deee-lishiss breakfast in the

morning, then “the group” would take a gander around their general store and the farm area and, eventually, amble over to Jim and Cynthia’s for the festivities.

The “festivities” always had us oohing and aahing over the house and their antiques and the hummingbird feeders and their garden.

Now, for those of you who have lived in the country, you know, there are animals; lot’s of them. And the funny thing is that animals like to eat ... especially in the easily accessed produce aisle Jim and Cynthia had created with their vegetable garden. They did their best to keep the “neighbors” out of their garden; even installing an electrified fence. But that didn’t stop the groundhogs (“Woodchucks”, for you people in other parts of the country).

Cynthia HATED groundhogs. She kept a loaded shotgun on her side porch, just in case she spotted one invading her treasured plot. Cynthia was from Texas, and, as they say, “You can take the girl out of Texas, but you can’t take Texas out of ...” (... well you know the rest).

There was one occasion on a particular party day, when “nature called” and I was sitting on the can (as one might delicately say). There was an open window next to me. As I was minding my own business (so to speak) I suddenly heard a slamming of the screened porch door and ... BLAM!!! BLAM!!! ... right outside the window! All I’ll say is, at that moment, things moved along REAL well.

Anyway ...

After a few years of driving up to Lost River, Danny and I fell in love with the area. We began to go up there on our own, without having any special reason to take us there.

Besides having the B & B, Ann and Margo owned a few cabins in the mountain above Lost River which they rented out to vacationers. Danny and I started to rent one of those cabins out for a week during the summer. It was just SO peaceful. And if we got a little antsy, it was always fun to come off the mountain to visit Jim and Cynthia, if they were there or get an ice cream at Ann and Margo’s store. Or just go out to dinner at the diner.

WE LOVED. IT.

One winter, while we were home in DC, Cynthia emailed us to say she had received notice from a local saying they were selling their cabin and wanted to know if anyone wanted to buy. She thought, since we went up there so much, we might be interested. Danny and I talked it over and thought, “Why not?” It would be a nice day trip just to check it out and see what it looked like. It couldn’t hurt anything.

We invited our friend Judy (as from Kansas City, but, at the time, was still a DC resident) and her THEN husband, “he who shall not be named”. (as from the “Harry Potter” books).

I remember it was an odd day for me in February. I say “odd”, because that’s how I was feeling ... “oddly”. It had snowed the night before, but had stopped when the day broke. So, in spite of my weird queasiness, we set off on our adventure.

Lost River is about a 2 1/2 hour drive directly west from DC; part of the drive is on interstate and the last hour takes you through country roads, up and over three mountain ridges.

We had stopped for breakfast, which did NOT improve my “not-so-good” demeanor. However, I didn’t tell anyone how I was feeling in order to not ruin anyone’s fun.

We were driving up the second and highest of the mountain ridges when my innards revolted. The need to “go” overwhelmed any “fun-ness” I was trying to convey.

Now, we were in the middle of NOWHERE! West Virginia doesn’t have the reputation for being THE wilderness for nothing. There was nowhere for little Stevie TO “go”, but out into that great wilderness. You know the old saying, “Does a bear s#!t in the woods”? Replace “bear” with “Steven” and you get the idea.

That was one trip I would NEVER forget!

Anyway, as we approached our destination, I was finally feeling better. (Thank the lords of the forest!)

Now, Danny and I had been renting Ann and Margo’s cabin on the same mountain where we were going house shopping that day. We always traveled on a dirt road that forked about a quarter way to our terminus. That day, the cabin we were going to required us to take the side of the fork we had never been on before. So we were tootling along, following the road, when we slowly found ourselves going back down the mountain. I thought, “That’s weird.” But after getting to the bottom of what turned out to be a small ravine, we did a hairpin turn. The mountainside suddenly loomed in front of us like the Great Wall of China. The road we were to take continued up that precipice.

(“WHAT? That is IMPOSSIBLE!”)

But, looking at the directions, that was where we were supposed to go. Thank GOODNESS we had four wheel drive! I had an out-of-body experience traveling, what felt like, straight up! Instead of looking at scenery through the windshield, we were looking at the SKY! It was CRRRAZY!

Making it to the top and following directions, we saw the cabin for the first time. A steep driveway led down some equally steep terrain to a small brown house nestled in the woods. The front part of the structure was attached to the hill, but the rest of the cabin was on stilts, where the back side stood about 30 feet off the ground. The chimney had smoke coming out and was seeming to say, “Y’all c’mon in!”. So we did!

We couldn't figure out how to drive down the driveway, so we parked on the road and walked down. The front door led onto a screened-in porch, which ran along the side of the house. There was another door that actually led into the cabin, so we knocked. The man who answered was shorter than I was! "Bob" was a talker. He and his spouse/husband/lover (I was never sure which it was) were selling in order to buy a house on the ocean. The aforementioned spouse/husband/lover was there, in the kitchen, baking cookies. (I suppose the aroma from the cookies was to entice us into buying). But he hardly said "peep". The whole time we were there, he managed a hello, a few sparse comments and a goodbye and that was it.

I, also, have to add (without making TOO much of a judgement) that he had on the WORST wig I had ever seen on any human being. As a matter of fact, after we bought the cabin and explained who we bought it from to some of the other folks in the area, they inevitably would say, "Oh! The guy with the wig!" (So, it wasn't just me, okay?)

The cabin had a moderately sized living room with a franklin stove (which explained the smoke in the chimney) and two sets of sliding glass doors that led out onto an open air deck at the back of the house. The kitchen was just an "L-turn" extension of the living room. There were two very small bedrooms, a small bathroom and one closet. And, of course, it had the obligatory cabin-type wood paneling on the walls AND the vaulted ceiling. The stuff on the walls was that which pretends to be wood, while the wood on the ceiling was genuine tongue-in-groove. The place only had a rainwater-collected cistern for water. It was an underground tank that amassed rain from the gutters. It was pumped into the house, but was not potable. Every once in a while, one had to pour bleach in it to kill whatever had "come in" from any bird or animal poop.

Lovely.

Well, we chatted a bit, said our farewells and "we'll letcha know" and walked back up the driveway.

All day, it had been semi-cloudy and chilly. However, arriving at the top of that driveway, the sun came out and shone its warmth on that little cabin. Danny looked at me and said, "You wanna get it?" And I spontaneously said, "Yes!". So we walked back down the driveway and signed an agreement! And, as they (no not the weather people) say, the rest is history!

We never regretted it. Going there made us let go of any tension and forget the stresses of the week. Danny always said he could feel his muscles relaxing the closer we got. Every spring, we would be treated with the entire hillside covered with purple from the wild redbuds that grew along its slopes. It was spectacular.

Now the “problem” with owning the cabin was that I was still doing shows at night and the weekend. Danny was working a government job, Monday through Friday. It was difficult to find a time when we BOTH were available to go! Finally, Danny devised that he would pick me up in our pre-packed car after my show on Saturday night (at that time, the theatre I worked at the most did weekday matinees instead of Sunday), drive us out when there would be no traffic and arrive about 1:30 in the morning. We would enjoy our Sunday, pack up Monday morning and leave to get him back to work on time.

Now, because of the cistern having stagnant water, we always liked to bring the fresh stuff with us. However (if you’ve noticed) water is heavy. So I figured if I bought a bunch of 5 gallon, red plastic “cans” meant for gasoline, we could carry a nice stash of fresh water with us without too much pain and strain.

When driving to Lost River, you need to go through the village of Wardensville. Like any tiny town, they had a strict 25 mile an hour speed limit. The town regularly made their budget by ticketing tourists flying through at 26 miles an hour. One night, on our way to the cabin, Danny had just done his compulsory 25 mph through town and began picking up speed to get up momentum to go over the third mountain ridge before Lost River.

Suddenly, we saw police lights and a siren. Apparently, Danny wasn’t quite out of the 35 mph just outside of town when the car passed into 40 mph ... or so we were “told”.

The thing about this situation was ... we had a car FULL of bright red gasoline tanks. Shining his flashlight in the car, the cop noticed it right away and his “friendly policeman” disposition changed. I thought, “uh oh!” (In hindsight, I giggle at Danny and I tripping over over tongues explaining what it was and what it was for ... “officer”.) The cop seemed to relax, but surprised us by saying he was going to ticket Danny for not having his seatbelt fastened. Danny had unbuckled the belt to get his billfold (translated, “wallet”, for you northerners). When Danny started to explain, the cop said, “I can either give you a \$65 ticket for speeding or a \$1 ticket for not wearing a seatbelt.” We paid the dollar ... with a check ... by mail.

(Later on, we figured, being it was the Fourth of July holiday, he must have been working with a quota that night.)

Time passed and we adored settling into that cabin .

We loved to feed the birdies up there. We had a bunch of bird feeders on the side of the deck. We would sit in our rockers on the screened in porch and watch the birds as we enjoyed our spectacular view of the valley below.

Well, we got word from the Association overseeing those homes, that bears were tearing up property to get to people's feeders. We were not to leave seed out when "you were not there". Well, it was near the end of the summer season when we drained the pipes and closed the cabin up for the winter. We thought we would just store the remaining birdseed in something airtight and seal it shut. We, oh, so cleverly put all the remaining seed bags in two black garbage bags. Then we put those bags in a large heavy duty lidded garbage can. Then we bungee corded the lid shut, so it couldn't be opened. THEN we placed it on the deck which was 30 feet off the ground with no means of access except through the house itself.

We waved goodbye to our little cabin for another year and off we went.

When we returned the next season, the can was gone, all the patio furniture was overturned and there was bear scat everywhere!

(I just realized ... there are an awful lot of references to excrement in this missive. To the squeamish, sorry about that! To the rest of you, isn't that hilarious???)

I finally did find the missing garbage can halfway down our mountain with the lid torn off and claw/teeth marks all over the top.

After that, we didn't feed the birdies any more.

One more observation, then I'm outta here.

We didn't know it when we purchased, but MANY of those cabins in that Association were gay owned. As a matter of fact, the president was a very friendly, hard-working lesbian. We had no idea we were moving into a gay enclave. Playing "devil's advocate", our friend, Jim Morris, asked one of the locals, whose family had been in the valley for five generations, what he thought of "all these gay people moving into the area." Jim said, the guy stopped and thought. Then he replied, "They make good neighbors."

And so, good neighbors, next time you ponder about the hollers of West Virginia, don't just think about the beautiful scenic mountains or the untouched wilderness, remember there are really wonderful people there as well.

Don't be SO judgmental!

That is, except if they are wearing a really bad wig.

Be seein' ya, neighbor!

Steve Boy

Cruisin'

In spite of having a glorious vacation cabin in the mountains, my darling Danny and I would, occasionally, go on vacation to places beyond our realm.

We liked cruises.

Now I know a lot of you naysayers are naysaying, "Oh no! Not cruises! You can contract norovirus that eats your innards out or, even worse, die outright from food poisoning. But, on the other hand, you could be experiencing new and delicious foods while tainting yourself into oblivion. (How's THAT for optimism?)

On separate occasions, we have enjoyed some great adventures to the Caribbean and to Alaska. (For you geographically stunted, these parts of the Earth are not any where near each other.)

However, one of the most amazing trips we took was a two week voyage around the tip of South America; starting in Santiago, Chile and ending in Buenos Aires, Argentina. *Wowie!) The trip was devised by our friend Judy's cousin, Steve and his husband Brent. The group going was Steve, Brent, a friend of theirs (name gone from my brain), Judy (who moved to Kansas City), her beau Bill, Danny and me.

Tierra del Fuego, baby!!!

Because southern Argentina is so close to Antarctica, we saw glaciers and penguins more than tropical beaches and half-naked bodies.

(Did you just read, "... half-naked bodies"? That must have been some other person taking over the writing for a moment.)

But, a "funny" thing happened on the way to Buenos Aires. I got thrown off the ship.

We were in the middle of our second week, only a few days from the end of our voyage, when I began to feel a little "stomachy". Danny and I were both supposed to go on a day excursion to experience some of the inland scenery. However, on the morning we were to go, I just wasn't feeling too hot. I told him to go and I would "sleep it off". After some hesitation, Danny relented and left for the tour.

As the day progressed, I was feeling worse and worse. The pain was most intense on the lower right side of my abdomen. I thought, "This ain't good". So, eventually, I got myself down to the "sick bay" to see what they (no, not the weather people) would say. The nurse took my "vitals" and listened while I recited my symptoms; abdominal pain, tenderness in the area and nausea. The doctor who came in was nice; a bit full of himself, but nice. Feeling around and "hm-ing" and "tch-ing", he declared I had appendicitis and would need surgery. Unfortunately, there was no x-ray machine in the

office to confirm that. Even wackier, they did not have a surgical theatre onboard and I would need to go ashore to have the procedure!

EEEEEEK!

Now ... where the ship currently was docked was at a little, hayseed of a town on the east coast of Argentina, south of Buenos Aires. The ship line was “officially” disembarking me off and transporting me to the only medical center in town. It wasn’t a hospital. It was more like a clinic. As the ship’s nurse told me, “It isn’t exactly Third World. It’s more like Second ...”.

That put a LOT of confidence in my disposition.

Trying not to freak out, I attempted to reach Danny, but, wherever the heck he was at that moment, he had no signal. I was on my own, baby!

So I went back to my cabin, packed a few items into a backpack and returned to the medical office. By then, they had arranged for the ship’s onshore contact to meet me at the dock. He was a VERY nice college aged local man who spoke excellent English and would act as my savior.

Leaving the ship with the image churning through my head of my body turning up in little pieces, scattered throughout the Argentinian landscape, he drove me to the clinic.

Being this was a small, out-of-the-loop kind-a town, NOBODY at the clinic spoke English; not even the doctor. I was laid out on a gurney in a slightly soiled side room. (Eew!) Thank the good Lord, my “friend” stayed at my side until the doctor came in about an hour later.

That doctor was amazingly warm and compassionate. Even though he didn’t speak any English and I only knew a few words of broken Spanish (from reading the ads in the subway in New York City ... “Las cucarachas entran pero no salen!”) we seemed to be able to understand each other. The main word I remembered was “dolor”; PAIN! He felt around and listened to what the translator told him I was saying. He palpated me some more, finally declaring “It isn’t appendicitis.” It was gastroenteritis, which is an inflammation of the intestinal lining usually caused by overeating.

(“Who are you saying was overeating???”)

They wanted to keep me overnight on anti-inflammatories and see how I felt in the morning.

(An aside here: Later on, Danny’s comment was that country doctors, acting more like veterinarians, often have a lot more sense than their trained urban medicine counterparts when diagnosing patients. That is because they are used to figuring out what is wrong without expensive diagnostic equipment; relying on their own touch, instincts and experience. In this case, that was certainly the situation.)

Unfortunately for me, the ship had already sailed with Danny on it. I was resigned to my fate.

My friend and translator had to leave! He waved good-bye, giving me his contact information, and left me ... alone ...

I was wheeled up to my room. It had two beds. However, with the nurses miming and a lot of bobbing of heads, I came to understand no one else would be joining me. To their credit, all the staff members were very kind to me. I think I was sort of a novelty to them, because different nurses and orderlies kept coming in to say "hello" or ask if I needed anything (of course, in Spanish). There was one nurse, however, who was particularly intent on preserving my comfort and safety. She made me understand (again, through a lot of miming and head bobbing) I needed to hide my backpack underneath me because there were people there who would steal it. (Yikes!)

When the nurses finally left the room, I was able to take stock of the luxuries that awaited me. Unlike American hospitals, Argentinian institutions do not supply pillows. So, wheeling my I.V. full of my anti-inflammatories over to the bathroom, I looked around and found a face cloth (they didn't supply towels either) and carefully rolled it up to use as an ersatz head rest. Having no towels wouldn't have mattered all that much anyway. The shower was missing its plumbing and the sink only dripped. Goodness only knows what I would use IF I needed to dry my hands ... toilet paper, I suppose.

I got back into bed and tried to call Danny on my cell phone one more time. At last, I reached him! He was a little freaked out to come back and find me gone. But the onboard nurse had contacted him to tell him what was going on. It felt so calming just to speak to him.

But that calm was broken when I realized I had brought my phone charger, but I didn't bring the plug adaptor I needed in order use the outlets in the clinic. (For you non-international travelers, each country has their own particular outlet array). I only had about a half a cell of power left! Danny's good idea was to turn the phone off and only turn it on when I needed to use it.

However, after I hung up with him, I felt truly isolated. The only thing left to do was to try to fall asleep, while I listened to another hombre moaning in a room down the hall.

A few hours later, a nurse came in, miming and bobbing, telling me I had a phone call and I needed to follow her to the office. So, grabbing my backpack and wheeling my I.V., I padded down the hall to the office.

The office contained a few desks scattered around a smallish room with lots of paraphernalia strewn among the desks. The one telephone was an old rotary phone on a desk near the door.

The call was from the ship line's customer help desk. They wanted me to know they were there to assist me. They told me, rather than me going back to the ship, someone would pack my bags in my stateroom and transport them directly to my home. They would even arrange a flight for me to get back to DC and not join Danny, still on the cruise. Of course, I would need to reimburse them, but the service was mine to take advantage of.

Great!

Now ... while I was on the phone, I noticed there were two men in civilian clothes wearing lots of gold chains speaking to a nurse over an open suitcase FULL of jewelry! There were chains and watches and necklaces. As I spoke, they kept glancing over at me, as if to say, "What the *blankity blank* is he doing here?" and "Mind your business!"

(YIPES! WHAT had I walked into?? Was this some kind of SMUGGLING RING???)

Giving them the privacy they needed to do their nefarious deeds, I immediately turned my back on them and tried to be as nonchalant on the telephone as I could:

"Yes. Yes. No, I don't see an international smuggling ring. Alright. Thank you."

I hung up and RAN back to my room.

("Please oh please don't let me be dead!!!")

Clutching my back pack, now for protection, I finally fell back to sleep, with the same hombre's moaning echoing in my ears and dreaming of James Bond coming to my rescue.

Well, the next morning, I felt great; no pain at ALL! When the doctor came in to check on me, he was happy with the results and said (still in Spanish, mind you) that he was discharging me. THAT much I understood! I called my friendly contact to tell him the news. He said he would come over and we would figure out the next step.

(Father, I confess ... I can be so single-minded sometimes.)

I was determined to get back on that ship and finish my CRUISE! So, when he arrived and listened to my wants, he agreed to drive me to the airport, buy my ticket (the cruise line would reimburse him) and send me to Buenos Aires.

Here's the thing, the ship was on its way to Montevideo, Uruguay; the SECOND to last stop on the tour. (Montevideo is very close to Buenos Aires; both cities sharing an ocean inlet.) He thought, if I got to Buenos Aires in time, I could take the last ferry to Montevideo in order to meet the ship, which was arriving the next day.

Plan in place, I got on a plane to Buenos Aires ... and sat and sat and sat. We took off an hour and a half late. By the time we landed, I had missed the last ferry. Now, I would have to FLY to Montevideo using my own wits, which, by now, was juuuuuust a little bit worn down.

Using my miming and bobbing, plus what broken Spanish I had in my arsenal, I was able to figure out where the ticket counter for the shuttle plane to Montevideo was located. I bought my ticket.

Now I had a couple of hours to relax, so I wandered around ... A LOT! I wanted to make sure where Customs was in order to get to the correct gate. You have to remember, Buenos Aires and Montevideo are in two different countries. Of COURSE you need to go through Customs. So, I wandered and squinted, trying to read the signs. I got to where I needed to be. But then I realized I was starving! I had not eaten since the morning before.

So I wandered and wandered some more in order to find the food court where I could get some gluten-free cuisine in the airport. ("Good Luck!")

It was then I realized, I was being tailed by the armed airport police. (Of COURSE, I was!) Maybe they thought I was a jewelry smuggler!!! But, I bet, with all that wandering around up to customs and back, I looked as suspicious as anyone they ever encountered.

So, again, I tried to look as nonchalant as I could. (I seemed to be doing an awful lot of "nonchalantin' since I got off that ship!) I casually strolled over to someplace that was selling "pollo" (chicken) and got a (hopefully) gluten-free half chicken with some gluten-free "arroz y frijoles" (rice and beans) ... then caaaaasually strolled over to a table in the middle of the court, caaaaasullay sat down and caaaaasually ate my food; all the time caaaaasully glancing at the armed guards who were boring their eyes into my head.

When I finished eating, I calmly walked to the Customs area to find my place at my gate. When I got to the Customs officer, he told me, in English, that I didn't have a ticket.

"WHAT???"

He told me I had a RECEIPT for a ticket. I needed to go to the airline's counter to get the actual ticket.

I ONLY HAD TWENTY MINUTES TO RUN TO FIND THE TICKET COUNTER, STAND IN LINE, RUN BACK TO CUSTOMS, STAND IN LINE, GET THROUGH CUSTOMS AND RUN TO MY GATE! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!!!!

I'm gonna tell you all right now, "caaaaasually" NOTHIN'! I ran like an IDIOT! However, I am happy to tell you, because EVERYTHING below the Equator NEVER runs on schedule, I made my plane in plenty of time. The real miracle was that I wasn't shot or hauled off to jail under suspicion of being suspicious.

NOW I found myself in the Montevideo airport. It was ultra modern and absolutely gorgeous. And it was a sixty minute ride from the city! (I hated that!)

My friend in Argentina had given me the contact number of his counterpart in Montevideo, so I called it. By then, it was around ten in the evening. He told me he was expecting my call. (“WHEW!”) That he would arrange a hotel for me ... but ... (sigh) I would need to find my own way to get there.

(“Whhhhyyyyyy?!???”)

Pulling up my bootstraps, I had the wherewithal (thank God!) to exchange my Argentinian pesos into Uruguayan pesos in the airport when I had arrived there. (Must they all be pesos?). By good fortune or luck or mercy, the worker at the exchange counter spoke ENGLISH! When I asked her how to get into the city, she replied there were three ways. You could go by taxi, which would cost about sixty American dollars. There was a shuttle bus which would cost about forty American dollars. Or there was a city bus which would only cost about four American dollars.

I opted for the shuttle bus. However, she wasn’t sure of the schedule. AFTERALL, it was fairly late at night and she couldn’t be positive they were still running. She pointed me to a Red Cap and said to ask him. Dutifully, I went over, failing to remember the fact that I didn’t speak Spanish. When I sweetly asked of him, “Shuttle Bus?”, he scowled at me and pointed to a bench.

I sat down.

And waited and waited and ...

... and a city bus pulled up.

I was so delirious by then, I got on the thing!

It. Was. PACKED!!! I surmised it must have been all the workers getting off their shifts and going home. Somehow, I actually understood the bus driver when told me the fare. I also was SO happy I had exchanged my money, so I could PAY the fare.

And now I stood and stood in the aisle on the bus.

We went through some gorgeous neighborhoods; palm trees and parks and mansions on both sides of the route. But when the houses began to get smaller and the buildings started to look bombed out and the graffiti started to become the predominant decor, I commenced to a-thinkin’ I was back in the thick of it.

Plus, I had NO idea where I was or how close I was to the hotel, much less the city’s center. But, suddenly, like an oasis in the desert, I saw a huge, brand spanking new shopping mall with a movie complex attached. And, there, through the bus window, just below my grateful eyes, I saw ... a TAXI STAND!!!

I leapt off the bus and jumped into the first cab that was waiting there. I told him the name of the hotel (which I had gotten from the Montevideo contact). The taxi driver never heard of it . (“Oh no!”) But it turned out , he didn’t understand me. When I showed

him the piece of paper on which I had scrawled the name, he immediately said, "Ohhh, the Hotel Hamlet!" and promptly sped off.

By ANOTHER miracle of miracles, the hotel was on the SAME STREET in which I had jumped into the taxi! Ten minutes later, I was walking up the steps to the hotel. The night clerk said (in English) he was expecting my arrival, told me of breakfast in the morning and handed me my room key!

When I walked into the room, I was so tired and relieved I burst out in tears. After a good cry, I realized, I was able to charge my phone because they gave you your choice of electrical outlet arrays. ("OH thank ALL the Saints!") I took a LOOOONG needed shower and slept the sleep of the dead.

The next morning, I continued with my game plan. I knew what time the ship was to dock. And even though I was starving, I was more intent on getting back on the liner. I skipped breakfast, had the desk hail me a taxi and rode directly to the cruise liner piers.

My ship was already docked with the gangway down. But when I tried to enter, my ship I.D. card wouldn't work. Then I remembered, I was "neutered" when they put me off the ship. I had the crew member call the ship's medical bay. When the nurse who had originally triaged me two days earlier saw me, she looked at me as if I had grown three heads. I told her the true diagnosis, how they treated it and how I was feeling fine. When she finally was able to close her gaping mouth and found her voice, she reluctantly used her authority to reinstate my I.D. Danny met me in sick bay and we happily went back to our room.

Later, we even went for a short walk on the streets of Montevideo!

The next day in Buenos Aires, we enjoyed a lovely walk around the city and dinner with our friends, perfectly ending our trip to South America ... TOGETHER!

One last word: Danny felt so sorry for me that I had gone through such a mess, he happened to have enough frequent flyer miles for our airline that he upgraded us to first-class!

First Class, baby! We got to Miami, rested and pampered.

However, we were late getting into Miami and had to run like FOOLS to get to Customs. Customs was PACKED! We got through and, once again, RAN like maniacs in order to get to the airline gate. They were just closing it when we arrived, but, with some chiding, they let us on.

We sat down ... and we waited ... and waited ... and ...

Yes, baby ... we were back in America.

And I was TRULY amazed I lived through it!

Still am.

So, next time you travel out of the country, make sure you take your outlet adapters, a pillow and, especially, some Pepto-Bismol. It will save you an awful lot of trouble.

Oh, Auntie Em! There's no place like home,
Dorothy

Ouch!

Although ... I've discovered I can have health "fun" at home just as easily as I can in international waters.

Two weeks before my 43rd birthday, I broke both my arms.

Once again, here is that Hitchcockian (I THINK I just made that word up) device in which the storyteller divulges the climax at the beginning of the tale in order to add tension. Well, BELIEVE ME, after you break BOTH arms, there is a WHOLE lotta tension in your life. (Consider necessary bathrooms habits, as an example ...!)

For some time, while my darling Danny and I lived in DC, we had a HUGE mulberry tree in our backyard which rooted itself on one side of our property and monopolized the rest of the yard by leaning over the rest of it like a drunken actor(!). The birds liked it, but it was a greedy scoundrel that took over, not only our patch of ground, but the plot of our wonderful neighbor, Meghan. (Meghan, if you are out there reading this, we miss you!)

One August day, Meghan and I agreed that something needed to be done to nip that bully in the bud. It was tangling it's branches in her telephone lines and threatened to yank the life out of them. (Remember, I was turning 43 in 1997 ... long before cell phones were on the horizon for general public use ... I keep TELLING you I'm old!)

I had a reeeeeeally tall ladder which I hauled into her yard. We both had brought out our clippers, so she agreed that I should use mine and she tossed hers onto the ground. In the land of bad ideas, I climbed all the way to the tippy-top of the ladder to reach some of the more rascally branches. In retrospect, I was feeling a false sense of security because (a) she was holding the ladder and (b) I had donned a bicycle helmet and goggles for protection.

You see, only a few weeks before, Danny's brother fell from a ladder while cleaning gutters, hit his head on cement and, sadly, passed away. (THAT'S a sure fire way to take the wind out of any story, Steven.) Rest In Peace, Davey.

ANYWAY ...

Very soon after I begin trimming, I completely lost my balance. As I've said, it was a TALL ladder; my feet must have been about 12 feet off the ground.

Now I am one of those people who gets completely still and quiet in the face of a disaster. Some people run; some people fight. I am like a little Bambi who sits very quietly in the tall grass, hoping the big, bad predators won't chomp them to pieces.

SO! As I was calmly falling in what seemed to be slow motion, I began to have a conversation with myself. Apparently, in these kinda situations, having a slo-mo pep talk usually precedes one's life flashing before one's eyes. I formulated that if I

completely relaxed, I could hit the ground like a paratrooper. With both legs being limp enough to take the impact, I would immediately roll to the side in order to disperse the shock to the body.

Did you know that gravity has its own set of rules? A body travels a whole lot faster than you THINK it is going to travel. It ain't like those Road Runner cartoons where Wile E. Coyote runs off a ledge and is suspended in midair, not dropping until he realizes nothing is beneath him.

No sirree, buddy! You plunge like a bowling ball falling from the Empire State Building.

As calm and as logical as I THOUGHT I was being, the impact was A LOT harder than I anticipated. Rather than acting like shock absorbers, my legs completely buckled and I slammed to the ground. (Are you laughing yet?)

Now, here's the thing ... I truly believe it wouldn't have been too bad if it wasn't for the fact that, when Meghan threw her clippers to the ground, she inadvertently placed them directly beneath ... me. On the way down, I had crossed my arms in front of my chest in anticipation of my "drop and roll" maneuver. Well, when I just dropped, without the roll, my chest with my crossed arms slammed down onto the handles of her clippers. That's right; snap, crackle and pop. After which, the rest of me continued to descend and I face planted into the ground.

Thank the good graces above I WAS wearing a bike helmet and goggles. No joke; I hit hard!

Meghan (who was a cool cucumber from years of teaching special needs kids at inner city schools in DC), gently got me to my feet and walked me through her house and out her front door, with the intention of getting Danny.

As the Fates would have it (there they were again!) Danny happened to be standing at our upstairs window and watched the whole comedy play out. He said he just walked out our front door, got in the car which was parked out front and started 'er up. By the time Meghan had led us out her house, we were both shocked to see him already waiting in the running car!

Another "thank goodness" was that the hospital was just up the street from where we lived and was minutes away.

When we got to the emergency room, we were utterly surprised when they rushed us past the 20 or so scowling people already seated in the waiting room and scooted us directly into the actual emergency room. We found ourselves in the shock/trauma section which was reserved for victims of gun shot wounds or mutilating car accidents.

Today's lesson, boys and girls ... if you end up in an emergency and don't want to sit around for HOURS and HOURS, put a little ketchup in and around your ear. You will suddenly find yourself being whisked into the inner sanctum before you even know what is happening.

Ya see ... if there is blood in the ear, that can be a sign of a life threatening head injury and is something that needs to be immediately attended to. Ostensibly, when I went face first into the dip, the goggles I was wearing tore the very top of my right ear and blood was gushing out of what was a very benign flesh wound. Obviously, they didn't know that was the case until they began to clean me up. Thank golly gosh, the nurses just laughed and continued their administrations, saying I was lucky there weren't any gun shot cases, otherwise they would have goodnaturedly tossed me out.

The only wacky thing I will say about the experience in the E.R. was that they assigned an intern to re-set my bones. Now, for thoses of you who have never had the good fortune of any osteopathic "fun", before any manipulation of the injury is done, they (no, not the weather people) inject a numbing agent directly into the bone to help defray the coming agony. Well, the intern missed the correct spots on a couple of tries. He kept poking and digging, creating its own little torture, leaving me a panting, bloody mess. (OH so lovely!) On top of which, he was timid in his efforts to realign the bones in BOTH arms. I'd say WAY too many attempts were made, which left me with the possibility of developing arthritis or a debilitating deformity in either arm sometime down the road of life.

Of course, trusting soul that I am, I didn't know that at the time. So when he determined all was done and right with the world, they wrapped me up, put me in a cast or two and sent me on my way.

Meanwhile, I just want to say, in my life, when I hoped to get into a cast, this was NOT what I had in mind.

As I was saying ...

(OH! ... This has nothing to do with what I am talking about, but "as I was saying" reminded me of the wonderful monologist Jack Paar. For youse young'uns, Jack Paar was the host of "The Tonight Show" before Johnny Carson ... and don't tell me you don't know who Johnny Carson is because I'll whack you! Anyway, in 1960, Jack Paar had a conflict with the censors at NBC because they told him he couldn't tell a joke involving a "water closet". Paar was so incensed, he walked off the show ON LIVE TELEVISION. After a few weeks, NBC apologized and he came back on. After the wild applause by the audience on his return, he looked at them and said, "As I was saying ..." then added, "before I was interrupted" and went on to tell the "offending" joke. I think of my

transition phrase as an homage to the late, great Jack Paar ... who was a rebel in his own right.)

ONWARD!

A few days after my adventure at the emergency room, I snagged an appointment with my primary car doc as a follow-up. When he saw the x-rays that had been sent over to him from the hospital which were taken after the intern had his way with me, he confirmed the ulna and the radius of both arms had either badly cracked or were broken completely. His concern was that the right arm had not been correctly set. (No foolin'!) He wanted me to see an osteopathic doctor right away and gave me a short list of names to call.

The one I was able to get in to see happened to be the doctor Washington, DC's pro-football team used on a regular basis. Thus, a few more days later, on a sunny afternoon, I wended my way over to his office, feeling quite macho. "I'm a football player, man!" and couldn't wait to see what burly, manly men I would encounter in his waiting room. I walked in. The room was filled with the elderly and the infirmed.

(Hmph!)

The doctor himself was gregarious and a bit aggressive in his bedside manner. He was a big, beefy guy who obviously had spent a day or two of his life on the 49 yard line. His office was equipped with its own x-ray machine, so he took a few more shots of his own. He confirmed what my doc had told me and said the right arm needed to be reset. Otherwise, arthritis would certainly set in. He told me I wouldn't need anything to numb it because it would only take a second to fix. He joked he didn't have a bullet for me to bite on.

Taking my arm in his meaty paw, he felt around ... aaaand SNAP!

TODAY'S second lesson, boys and girls is never ... ever ...

NEVEREVEREVERNEVEREVER allow anyone to reset a bone without some kind of numbing agent. Even if you are in the middle of the woods in agony after tripping over that dead deer carcass. Wait until they carry you the 50 miles to the hospital. It is worth the time spent.

The pain was so unbelievably excruciating, animal noises came out of my mouth. I suppose he was used to dealing with those testosterone laden players who are inured to daily pummeling and misery. Personally, I am a delicate flower with an extreeeeemely low threshold to pain. THIS was not my idea of fun.

He put me in a "soft cast", said I was all set and sent me on my throbbing way.

Now, I admit, after a short while, it actually did feel better. But if I am ever faced with something like it again, you can be assured, I am bringing a shaker of

cosmopolitans, heavy on the vodka and having a snort or two or five before ANYONE touches me.

“Bite the bullet“, my heinie!

Now came the next hurdle.

Every summer for years and years, Dan and I rented a house for a week or two at Rehoboth Beach, Delaware with our friend Cindy along with a rotating clan of friends and characters. We always put in our down payment well in advance in order to ensure we would have something over our heads for our intended stay. Well, that year, we had booked a house for a week in August. We were to occupy said rental only a couple of weeks after I slammed down out of that tree. Since our down payment was not refundable and the beach sounded like a great place to be quiet and recover, we all agreed to follow through with our plan. So off we went!

After the first day of settling in and reacquainting ourselves with the town, I resolved myself to frequent walks by myself because, for me, swimming in the ocean was “out” and the thought of building sand castles made my arms throb.

Do you know HOW MANY strange people will come up to you if you have two casts on your arms? My quiet walks always turned into gabfests with curious strangers and sadists. But most everyone wanted to stop and tell me how their Great Uncle Henry broke his toe or their best friend Myrtle lost an arm in her wringer-washer. However, in particular it was motorcycle bikers (“Whoa, man! What happened to you??”) and well-intentioned older women.

Early one day, I had decided to take a walk on the beach. It was fairly early in the day ... which is unusual for me because, anyone even slightly acquainted with me knows I am a late riser. Because of the early hour, there weren’t yet many people out. As I was strolling along, in the distance, I saw a woman “of a certain age” coming straight toward me ... and she was bookin’ it. (I had a flashback to that time Michael Bennett tagged me at a Christmas party.) Anyway, as she got closer to me, she tossed her hands straight out to her sides, ran right up to me and threw her arms around me, crying, “What happened to yooooooooou???”

I had never seen this woman before in my life.

I guess it goes to show that another’s misfortune can bring out the best and nosiest in people.

But the most memorable event on that particular stay was the “scenic train ride along the beach” our friend Cindy booked for Dan, she and I. On paper, it sounded great; a ride on a restored train which took you along the shores of Delaware to the next town and back.

We should have known something was up when it turned out we were the ONLY adult passengers that didn't have hundreds of hyper-active children hanging onto them.

They sat us in what looked like the train's old cafe car; tables with benches instead of seats. We also should have gotten more leery when the "restoration" looked like it needed a good coat of paint unto itself.

We finally got rolling, but, curiously, only stayed at about the same pace as a limping dog. With my sore arms bouncing, I could have walked faster! "Well", we thought, "maybe it was to allow us to enjoy the scenery even more." But as we chugged along, we realized we were no where NEAR the ocean! We seemed to be going through every back yard and crappy alley there was between the two towns. When we came to that realization, we couldn't help but start to giggle. It was then we began to attract attention from the some of the parents seated near us. The more garbage and dirty laundry we passed, the louder we guffawed. When we went through the garbage dump, we completely lost it! I mean a GARBAGE DUMP! The "scenic" old refrigerators and rusty heaps of god-only-knows-what sent us into complete hysterics.

Then came the clowns. No really, clowns: "Big Stumpy" and "Little Stumpy". Big Stumpy was a sad faced clown, sort of like a poor man's Emmett Kelly. But, unfortunately for our then-present fragile states of mind, Little Stumpy was a pre-teen boy with curvature of the spine and horrible scars on his face and neck which made the poor child look like Freddy Krueger in "Nightmare on Elm Street".

We were in trouble.

Now, obviously, the clowns were there to entertain the kids. There were animal balloons and jokes and silly magic tricks. And, to our credit, we did manage to get a hold of ourselves. We KNEW it was HORRIBLE to laugh while they were performing, lest everyone think we were cretins making jest at the expense of that unfortunate child. But every time we looked out the window and passed the next heap of rusty bicycles and stinking trash cans, we flew into apoplectic snickering. I'm not sure which was more painful ... my broken bones or muzzling my hilarity. Oh, suppressing it hurt! It really hurt!

But Big Stumpy and Little Stumpy weren't through with us yet, oh no!

We were all going to sing a song together. We were going to sing, "Bring Back My Bonnie to Me". However, every time we sang "bring back", we were to raise and lower our arms.

It is at this point I need to remind you that I was suffering from TWO broken arms that happened only two weeks before. Do you know how painful it is to even MOVE a busted limb just to scratch your nose?? It is agony!

So, controlling ourselves as best we could, under the, by now hostile eyes of both Stumpys, we acceded to play along ... that is until we got to the “bring back”s. The first time I did it, I hollered out in pain ... then burst out hysterically. This caused poor Cindy and Danny to completely lose it and all decorum went out the window into the passing trash heaps. But I kept DOING IT! I don't know WHY! I guess, by then, I was beyond reason. But instead of singing “bring back”, all I could get out was “OWIE, OWIE, OWIE!!!”.

FINALLY the song was over.

Glaring at us, Big and Little moved into the next car.

However, we STILL needed to RETURN to where we had began. But, instead of turning around. The train jolted to a halt, then began its slow, limping trip BACKWARDS!!! We reversed through all the same rusted barbed-wire and stagnation we had just experienced. Only now, it was under the hateful stares of all of the other adults on that train car.

It was a miracle we got out of there alive.

I have to tell you, we were exhausted from laughing and mortified by our questionable behavior. But it is a memory we share today that STILL brings tears of hysteria to our eyes.

One more thing. Looking on the bright side, isn't it wonderful how a debilitating injury can bring such joy into one's life?

Optimistically yours,
Old Stumpy

Hittin' the Heights

I don't know WHAT I was doing on top of that ladder in the first place. I have always hated high places.

Why the fear of heights? Maybe it's because I am "altitude-challenged". (Hah hah hah.) Nah. It HAS to be genetic. I remember being scare-ified from very early on. Looking out from on high wasn't too bad ... but looking down ... oh no ... no. The feeling is just like Hitchcock depicted it in "Vertigo": the floor goes down while the closeup on your face gets even closer. (Maybe that's what scares me.)

HOWEVER ... being the ornery (yet very sweet) person I am, I REFUSE to let that particular frailty get the best of me. Even as young'un, I had a mania for challenging myself to test my phobia to the point of absolute foolhardiness. I came so close to killing myself through my antics, I am surprised, writing this right now, I am not dead. But children are a funny bunch ... what would cause a heart attack in an adult is just another day of play for them. And I was determined to PLAY!!

I had some altitude attitude!

Near my Grammie's house, there was an old humpbacked bridge that crossed over some railroad tracks which were at the bottom of a deep ravine. I would say it was about forty to fifty feet from the middle of the bridge to the tracks below. The bridge itself had a cast iron, I-beam girder frame with thick planks of wood as its roadbed.

I would wait until I could see a train coming, then launch myself to the OUTSIDE of the bridge and lower myself down to the supporting girders holding the roadbed. I would then side step across it gripping the wooden planks and used only the lip of the I-beam as my toe hold. THEN, when I got to just over the tracks, toward the middle of the bridge, I would wait until the train passed directly underneath me so I could feel the diesel heat and exhaust pass over my body. It was then I continued on to the other side.

I decided long ago that children are certifiably insane. If they were adults with that mentality, they surely would be in a straitjacket and shackled in some padded cell somewhere far away where they couldn't hurt themselves.

Another stroke inducing antic I used to do in order to prove my mettle was devised in the elementary schoolyard near my home.

There were two maple trees of about the same size and height that grew fairly close to each other. They were fully grown, which would put them at about thirty feet in height. The neighborhood kids played a game of challenge to see who could climb up and jump from one tree to the other without hurting themselves. (Such a good idea!) The higher up you did this switchover, the better your neighborly reputation.

Now, even though my friend Jay had broken both his arms attempting such a feat, I was undeterred.

Because I was a tiny person and didn't weigh very much, I found I could climb and cross over higher than any other kid. But my piece de resistance happened only when there was absolutely no wind to stir the trees. I would climb to the very tippy tippy top where the tender twigs were only about a half an inch thick and ... ever so gently ... ease myself from one tree's topmost sprig to the other.

And then I would have such a panic attack, I could barely move my limbs to get myself down. It was like I was a cat stuck in a tree where the fire department has to come and pull them down. ("Hello Mr. Fireman!") Of course, the anxiety I experienced was more from the dizzying height than the ridiculous feat. But, by gum, I DID IT! And, I am shocked and amazed to say, I did it more than once!!!

(Why am I not lifeless?)

However, when I became a sensible grownup (Is there such a thing?) I found myself still driven not to let this height "difficulty" surmount my psyche. But, also, as an adult, there was a problem. As I got older, I became more of a wienie. That was because I was now old enough to KNOW that my attempts of bravery would ... and probably should ... kill me. The panic and anxiety were overWHELMing whenever I tried to test myself.

I became such a wimp with heights, I remember being in my forties and having to hide under a blanket in the backseat of my parents car while my poor father drove us over a mountain in the Catskills to go to a wedding.

("Oh, I'm okay. Just a little tired.")

So much for my big, brave experimentations.

But, then, I went to the Rocky Mountains.

(WHAT was I thinking???)

In 2006, it was agreed that my darling Danny, I and our friend Bonnie (who we knew from DC and now lives in Tucson) would take a brief vacation in Estes Park, Colorado, just outside the entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park. Bonnie had gone to college in Colorado and her parents had lived in Steamboat Springs. She knew the area well and had hiked in the park on many occasions. She had snagged a beautiful, newly-built cabin on a stream for us, just outside of town which, conveniently, was on the way to the park entrance.

I had never been there before and was only thinking of immersing myself in the beauty of nature. For some reason, the thought never occurred to me that we were going to the MOUNTAINS!

Just prior to our trip, Danny was out of the country for work, so Bonnie and I flew together into Denver and rendez-voused with Danny at the airport.

The drive was gorgeous. And, as some of you know, unlike the mountains in the East where there are a lot of foothills, the Rockies suddenly rise up from a flat plain. So, as we drove to Estes Park, the trip was mostly on even ground, encountering only a few hills as we drove into town.

Nothing fear-inducing the whole time!

It was Easter weekend; mid-April that year. The weather was temperate; warm during the day and chilly at night.

After a couple of days of lovely weather, enjoying the charm of the area, (especially the “charm” of the hotel where “The Shining” was filmed!), gorging on caramel apples and visiting the park, there was a sudden blizzard in the mountains. The area we had walked around just the day before was apparently now covered in deep snow. Of course, because we were staying at such a lower elevation, it was practically spring in the valley.

Bonnie, being the avid (no ... RABID) outdoors person that she was, had brought her snow shoes, just in case there was “weather”. She suggested Danny and I rent some equipment and we could ALL go snowshoeing together.

Bonnie and Danny are early risers. I find 9:00am to be the crack of dawn. But, “good for me”, I dragged myself awake and up. We got to the store just around the same time I found myself chickening out. But, in my usual manner, I became determined not to be a baby and let the opportunity pass.

So there we went, up the road to the park.

Because it was early, we were one of the very first people there. The parking lot was only just being plowed out.

Putting on our gear (easy for Bonnie; not so for moi), we set off on our way.

But where WAS our way? The newly fallen snow had buried all the hiking trails. Bonnie, being the adventurer that she was, said she knew where the trails were under the blanket of white. (Or, at least, that’s what she told us.) We high-stepped through some beautiful forest and followed a crest of land that led us higher and higher. I could tell we were rising in elevation because it was getting harder and harder to breathe. But I couldn’t tell how high because of the density of the trees. (“Couldn’t see the forest for the trees”?)

Suddenly, the sun came out just as we came to a slight clearing. It shone its rays on a beautiful landscape of untouched snow, tall pines ... and land faaarrr below us.

(“Just keep looking out, Steven. Just keep looking out!”)

After a brief rest (I needed it to start breathing again), we continued.

The trail wound back into the woods, giving us a glimpse of the valley below every once in a while. (Once in a while was good for me.)

Then we came to, what I can only describe as, someplace no sane person should tread, with or without snowshoes. It was a treeless incline, which could easily be mistaken for A CLIFF. It was so steep, no trees grew on it. On the other side, about a hundred yards beyond this GAP, the tree line started up again.

Bonnie again encouragingly offered, "I know where the trail is. I've hiked this a dozen times!"

All I could see was a tilted, white deathtrap looming in front of me.

I stupidly snuck a peak down. It was at least a gazillion feet to the bottom, with sharp spikes of vegetation just waiting to impale themselves on me when I fell. Danny and Bonnie somehow, someway, convinced me it would be worth the try. It was then my "can do" bravado kicked in and I, weakly, said, "Okay". Bonnie led, with me second and Danny last. This was in case anything happened to me, Danny would know to help me ... as if my horrified screams of terror wouldn't be a dead giveaway.

("dead giveaway "... see what I did there?)

Bonnie began to "break ground". (WHAT ground??? You couldn't SEE the ground! There was no ground to BREAK!!!) Only looking at the foot prints Bonnie had just left for me in which to insert my snowshoes, I got about a third of the way across when a bounteous panic attack hit; full on vertigo, nausea and shaking.

I did the sensible thing. I froze.

They both sweetly, but with some concern, asked if I wanted to go back. No. I was this far, I would persevere, even though I was walking into the jaws of death and destruction. And besides, who the heck wants to turn around on this precipice???

I pushed myself to slowly begin moving again.

FINALLY, when we reached the haven of the other side, I burst into tears. (So manly.) But it was hard to cry when there was no air in my lungs! I had left that somewhere 50 feet behind me!!

Struggling to get into the safety of the woods, I flopped down on a log and could go no farther. Bonnie said she knew there was a clearing coming up, so she and Danny went on ahead with the understanding that I would follow them in a minute or ten. They went over a small rise where the trees pinched any view of them and they were gone.

Finally finding my breath (and whatever else I had lost), I rose and followed their tracks over the small rise. What I saw next sent chills down my spine.

The rise was actually the edge of a basin of a partially frozen mountain lake. The Rockies soared up on all sides of the water, with a crystal blue sky shimmering over

them, highlighting their snow capped beauty. This magnificence was named Dream Lake ... for a very obvious reason.

Danny stood on the edge of the water, grounding this picture with his humanity. I immediately took a photo.

It was the very best nature could offer.

When I look back and think I might have missed that unbelievable sight by giving into my fear, I am compelled to see it as a metaphor for my life.

Dare to face your fears, The reward for doing so may be just over the next rise. But, remember, you have to go back the same way you just came! And THAT is what builds character! However, it will be so much easier, not only for you, but for those who come after you, on account of the fact, in spite of your fears, you have already forged the way.

And character? I am lousy with it!

Shakily, but proudly yours,
Shrinking Violet

A postscript to this tale:

Danny and I were so psyched about snowshoeing, we each brought a pair to bring home to DC. We anticipated constantly using them up at our cabin in West Virginia. The only time they ended up being utilized was in a snowstorm in DC. I had to somehow get to work after the busses and Metro had shut down.

Oh well. The best laid plans ...

Another surprise:

Danny found the picture. I thought it had been lost when my laptop was stolen in a break-in years ago. It may not have the sparkle of my mind's eye, but it still is an amazing sight.

Dream Lake



WHAT just happened? (Part 3)

Well folks ...

I have had a story in my back pocket for a looong time now, but it has been difficult to figger out if I should tell it to you. It ain't a rip-roarer. It might even put some of you off. You see, it has a spiritual connotation which could possibly raise a skeptical hackle or two among the more agnostic readers. But, then again, it could just as well cause a chuckle. However, when you get to the meat of it, it blurs the line between "tee, hee, weird" and "this is really meaningful".

Look, so many of my friends AND family are agnostic to atheistic. And I've always respected their boundaries. I've never been one to shove ANY of my beliefs in their faces ... because, as I know from my experience on the steps of Ford's Theatre, one shove leads to another. (N'est pas?). However, there have been some events that have occurred, at least in my life, where the unknown becomes known; leaving one dumbfounded and stunned. I have to tell ya, though, when it does happen, you look at the sky a little differently. You find yourself gazing upward, saying, "Ohhhh! Okay! Um ... THANKS!"

So, here is my edition of ... "BELIEVE IT OR NOT!"

Ready?

(OH! I have to add, I was completely sober when this happened. No booze; no "funny" stuff. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, for pity's sake!)

First, here's a clue to my state of mind at that time:

1988 ended up being the final year I lived in New York City. At the end of 1987, I had a bad incident at an audition that really turned me off to acting.

I had been called to audition to be the understudy for Joel Grey in the revival of "Cabaret" on his National Tour. There were only four of us auditioning; one, of whom, was a friend of mine that I had known for almost the entire time I lived in Manhattan. In the audition, the director and choreographer sang us and danced us. They made us read several scenes. Then they repeated the whole thing over again. One of the actors was released, so now, it was just three of us; me, my friend and a guy from Chicago who was currently doing the role there. More singing; more dancing. Finally they asked us to wait in another room. And we waited... and waited. After the proverbial eternity, we were told they were casting the fella from Chicago. So, my friend and I went back to the changing room. I knew how badly he wanted the role and felt sad for him. Of course, I wanted it, but I had gotten so inured to rejection, it was water off my back. But I sincerely felt for HIM ... my friend. And I told him so.

I said, "I'm sorry you didn't get the role. I know how much you wanted it."

He turned on me like a demon. He cursed me every which way; accusing me of being fake, of being insincere. That I was a f-ing phony. And it got worse. It was a lashing that came from his depths.

I didn't say another word. I left feeling overcome with hurt, anger and confusion. It was then I realized I didn't have the stomach for the business side of "show business". People who I thought were my friends were actually cut-throat competitors. It would hurt too much to be involved in something that would cause me so much pain.

No sir. Not for me.

So, the turn of 1988 saw me aching badly and being disillusioned from giving up my dream to be on stage.

However, I still needed to work! New York City ain't cheap now and it sure wasn't then. Fortunately, the companion of a friend of mine was working for British Airways at LaGuardia Airport. They needed someone to field letters from customers claiming frequent flyer miles. I knew how to type and was semi-intelligent, so I got the job. The fly in the ointment was that it was a two and a half hour ride ONE WAY, requiring me to take two subways and a bus from my apartment on the Upper West Side in Manhattan to the airport in Queens.

There was FOUL weather that entire month of January, but I still needed to slog to work.

However, there was one day that changed my life (for more reason than just the weather).

A harsh snow storm fell upon New York, closing most everything down. However, there I was, dressing to get ready for work in order to make my usual journey.

No day off for me.

Now, at that time, bolo ties were de rigeuer. (Remember, it was the 80's). For Christmas, a couple of weeks before, a good pal of mine had given me a gorgeous bolo tie made of glass. When the glass was still molten, metal dust had been blown over it, melting it into the glass, leaving a unique pattern. It was beautiful; a truly one-of-a-kind piece.

Well, while I was getting dressed, I dropped it, shattering it into a zillion pieces.

My head exploded. I was FUMING!

"I just broke the ONE thing that gave me any joy and now I have to go out in a BLIZZARD to a STUPID job that I don't care about that is TOO far away and is sucking the life out of me!!!"

My outlook was grim ... and so was I.

However, the clock was ticking. So, bundling up in a long jacket and a heavy scarf, I pulled my hat down over my ears and faced the onslaught of snow and wind.

Finally getting down into the subway station to catch the first train I needed to take, I walked to the end of the platform and waited.

It. Was. FREEZING! Even though I was inside, I could still feel the wind creeping in from the street above me.

I was miserable.

As I stood there fuming and fussing, out of the corner of my eye, I saw, what I thought was a mosquito. Naturally, it wasn't a mosquito ... it was January in the middle of a snow storm! I quickly realized it was just a piece of lint wafting on the cold breeze coming through the cracks above my head.

Then, for some crazy reason, my mind began reeling through a thought process which seemed to have a life of its own.

"Of course it's not a mosquito, Steven. They couldn't survive this weather. And besides, when they do come out, they live only a few days, maybe a week at most."

My brain kept going.

"Well, flies don't have much of a life either. Three weeks tops and then they're dead. Some reptiles do pretty good, but, most die with a few months. Mammals even have a relatively short life. Cats and dogs ... what? ... Twenty years at most? Apes only get to fifty or sixty years. Well, now that I think of it, in the grand scheme of things, when you compare our lives to the geological age, man has an incredibly short ..."

And then it happened.

It was as if the train tracks, the wall beyond, the steel girder supports and the darkened tunnel were painted on canvas. They were suddenly pulled to the side ... looking the same as when you pull back a window curtain to peer outdoors.

I found myself standing on a quiet mountaintop that was part of a ridge of mountains which spread out to the left and the right of me. The sky was dark, but it wasn't cold. There was a mildly warm breeze wafting, enough to stir my clothes.

Looking straight out, I could see another ridge of mountains running parallel to the ridge I was standing on. Between the two elevations was a deep, dark valley. It was so dark, no light penetrated it at all. I could only see about a third of the way down the rocky slopes of both ridges.

However, directly across from me, an incredibly BRIGHT light was rising from behind the opposite peaks. As it got higher, I could feel the warmth of its rays on the skin of my face. But, the higher it rose, it became more and more difficult to look at ...

And then the "curtain" fell back into place and I was on the subway platform again.

I felt the most calm and peaceful I had ever felt in my life. It was a peace that went to my bones. But it was more than that. It was a peace that seemed to come from the warmth of a knowledge that I was being cared for.

Then, at that very moment, I heard two words in my right ear:

“Don’t worry.”

AND THEN ALL CRAZINESS BROKE LOOSE!

I began shaking with amazement and shock. In my head, I kept repeating, “What just happened? What just happened?” I looked around to see if anybody else was going through the same thing as me. All I saw were folks reading crumpled newspapers or shivering from the cold.

“WHAT just happened???”

Then I tried to recreate it:

“mosquito, fly, lizard, cat, dog, ape, man ...”

Nothing.

But, I still had the “Don’t worry” lingering in my head. I couldn’t tell you if it was a male or female voice. It had a neutral timbre that could have been either. I just know it sounded soothing; comforting like a loving parent.

“Don’t worry.”

Ever since that day, it has been my watch cry. I have taken it to heart. And has guided me throughout my life.

Actually, soon after that, through what seemed like a series of crazy coincidences, I left New York and moved to Washington, DC. There, a sequence of events completely turned my life around: I met my friend, Leon, who brought me to his church, which I started attending and, by joining the church choir, began singing again. There I made another friend, Stephen Carter Hicks, who cajoled me into auditioning for a political and social cabaret, which I got into. That job led me to auditioning for a DC production of “Cabaret”, for which I won the Helen Hayes Award for Best Actor and received an accolade from Washingtonian Magazine as the best performance in 25 years. This, not only caused a revival of my acting career and, unlike that other “Cabaret” experience, it revived my love for the art of performance. I found friends that I still cherish to this day and, of course, I met my darling, beloved Danny.

From that strange and miraculous experience on a freezing January day in the subway of New York City, I learned, no matter WHAT happens, all will be well. Trust that things will work out. I may get sick ... and I did ... and I may even die ... but that doesn’t really matter, because I will ALWAYS be taken care of.

And as Bobby McFerrin sang,
"Don't worry, be happy."
Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, oo-oo, ooh, oo-oo!

That's my story and I'm stickin' to it.
Your pal Stevie

Happy Birth

Well, boys and girls, Unca Stevie turned 66th years old in August of 2020. I am not saying this for next year's well-wishes or cards or balloons or gifts or MONEY or NEW CARRR!!! (ahem) I am simply thinking this would be a good time to look back on my life ... which I have managed to DREDGE UP, lo, these many chapters ... and reflect on the things I've learned in 66 years.

...

NOTHING! ABSOLUTELY NOTHING!!!

...

But really ... What I HAVE learned is that a twisted sense of humor can go a long way. And, even though one may THINK they are unique in the way one looks at life, there are a whole BUNCH of lunatics out there who share in one's skewed view of living.

I've learned to keep quiet when the situation called for me to be screaming at the top of my lungs. Sometimes, if you are "vewwy, vewwy quiet," your inner Bugs Bunny will tell you the truth. The knowledge you were looking for while "hunting for wabbits", will be truly evident. Your reward will be a huge figurative smooch on the lips by the universe.

(Thank you Warner Bros. Cartoon fans!)

I also learned not to anticipate. ("What does THAT mean?")

My friend Cindy once asked me why I never was nervous leading up to an audition. My answer was because I didn't anticipate what was to come. You see, early on, I taught myself not to worry unless I had something to worry about. Otherwise, I'd be fretting about something that doesn't exist.

I think this is because I was "tormented" so often in early middle and high school, I knew I could not let myself dwell upon what may or may NOT be, the possibility of an unpleasant situation. Otherwise, I would be in a constantly, frantic state of anxiety inducing flop sweat. When nothing happened ... great! I didn't waste my time and energy anticipating a false outcome.

That said, it IS always good to be prepared; which is different than anticipation. An example of this happened very recently with The Big Horn Fire that swept through Tucson in June of 2020 (and STARTED this whole writin'). To be prepared, my darling Danny and I packed up our car with the things we felt we needed to save. We prepared for the worst. However, we kept going through our daily lives, not really giving our emotional energy to the fire raging just a few miles from us. We didn't waste our time on conjecture. It would have been self-defeating and a waste of time.

But, sometimes, no matter how much you prepare, the train can still go off the tracks.

In 1998, in order to prepare for my recovery from surgery after an unfortunate diagnosis of a brain tumor, Danny and I assembled everything we thought would be needed for me to pass the time. We set up the TV and a radio near my bed at home. All my favorite foods were cooked, frozen and ready to be warmed up when I wanted them. A stack of books were next to my bed on one side and a pile of crossword puzzles on the other. I was READY!

However, after the surgery, I couldn't walk; I couldn't talk. I had real difficulty seeing. The room constantly spun every time I tried to raise my head. Even though we had prepared for a long recovery, in reality, I wasn't able to do anything at all.

That was when we needed to ask for help.

Listen to me, children:

IT IS OKAY TO ASK FOR HELP!!!

As a matter of fact, people are HANKERING to help. I learned that you can't let pride or the thought of "I can do this myself!" stop you for relying on your friends or family. No man (or woman, thank you) is an island. In some cases, it really DOES take a village! There is no shame in building one together!

In the theatre, we all come together to create something wonderful. Everyone has their "job" and everybody works toward the same goal. (Although, there have been some bad eggs ... but that doesn't help my point).

The point IS, if Danny had not asked for help, he would have had to have been my primary caretaker 24/7, while holding down his job. In the days before Zoom, it would have been a monumental task, if not impossible.

DON'T FEEL GUILTY FOR ASKING!

And besides, look at it this way: you are giving the helpers the gift of giving by letting them give their gifts to you.

Get it? Got it? Good!

So, don't worry.

(WHERE have we heard THAT before?)

I've said it before, I'll say it again. I have learned from a very good source that you will be taken care of no matter what happens. Even if you believe it will only be "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" for you, you will be returning to the Earth to create new life! Your essence will bear new growth! Nature at its best!

And for those of us who believe in something more, well ... God WILL take care of you. I TRULY believe that.

I believe in the Divine Grace. I believe in the forgiveness of the Spirit. And I believe in the power of prayer!

“Why?”, you inquire.

Because ...

Because, over the years, I have been ill a multitude of times. However, I have received the prayers of folks who took the time to send out their positive energies to help me heal. And, believe me friends, I have needed those prayers often. My personal experience is that it works.

With ALLLLLLL that said ... even though I don't take my time here on Earth lightly, I make light of the way I have lived on Earth.

I have learned a sense of humor is vital to our existence. Find humor in everything you do. Learn to laugh at the ogres and they melt away. Don't take yourself too seriously. Sometimes, I, myself, have fallen short of this; I'm only human. However, I am always ready to share laughter with another. The cliché is real: laughter is contagious. Use it! (... especially when you are looking at the alarming events that are going on around you right now). Laughter is the tonic that will help stop you from going TOO crazy. Laugh, for your own sake!!!

So, now ...

As I find myself wandering down the final leg of this crazy path of life I'm on, I know the journey ain't quite over yet. I realize, sometimes I will need to hit the pause button and taking a pee break, but the show must go on ... until I hear a fat lady singing.

There are more stories to be had, just not immediately. I'm too old for more excitement ... I need a break.

But I promise to TRY to remember to laugh at myself, if you will. (... laugh at yourself, not me. I hate that ...) Keep chucklin' and I will “see” ya soon!

Laughing WITH you.

With all my heart and gratitude!

The Birthday Boy

- EPILOGUE -

A Tribute

Of course, in the theatre, there always is an encore!

However, this writing is going to be different than what you have been used to seeing ... and, in a way ... a bit familiar.

In the past, I've regaled you with my tales of "Famous People I've Met". At least to me, they were fun and interesting to tell. But, this time, it will be stories of ordinary people I have known who were extraordinary in each of their own ways.

You see, over the first half of 2020, I lost several friends and family members. Ironically, their passings were not from the Covid pandemic. No, these were people who all died in their own way, but, to all of us who loved them, always too soon. So, I thought I would give them their due and give you a glimpse of some of the wonderful beings who had recently left this good Earth. They may not have been famous, but they all have had an impact on those who knew them. And, most certainly, on the development and, in some cases, the trajectory of my life.

These will not be biographies. These will be impressions and events that I experienced when I was lucky enough to be their companion in the time they were here. So, no wacky stories. No true fame. Just tales of my friends and one cousin who helped to mold me into who I am today.

- Dan Kirsch -

I met Dan in 1980 in New York City. He and I both ended up working for a small, non-union theatrical touring company. He was doing a bit of lighting and set design and I was assisting the producer with day-to-day tasks. Coincidentally, Dan and I lived only three blocks apart from each other on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Dan was, what they used to call, "a long drink of water" of a guy. He was tall and slender, albeit very slightly stooped, as if to apologize for his height. He had large features with a truly sweet smile and thick, perpetually unruly hair. He was very smart to the point of, occasionally, being quite officious. On the flip side, he liked being silly and he loved to laugh.

Originally from Providence, Rhode Island, his family had kicked him out of the house when he was a teen as soon as they found out he was gay. As a result, Dan was a peculiar mix of being VERY independent, very free spirited and, when the scenario

called for it, extremely business-like. But the thing I remember most about Dan, was that he was intensely loyal to his friends who had become his family.

We got to be close because we often ended up doing our laundry together at a laundromat halfway between our two apartments. In those early days, we toyed around with being “more than just buddies”, but quickly settled into a close, friendly companionship that lasted until the day he was gone.

In 1984, Dan was hired to co-ordinate the restoration of an old vaudeville house in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Then, when the work was done, he was to move into the position of executive director and run it as an arts center. It was called the Zeiterion Theatre. It still exists today.

Dan asked me to be his assistant. I had just finished a summer job and had no other prospects, so I said “let’s do it”! It was there I truly learned the concept of what it means to have a strong work ethic. He taught me, it wasn’t as important to work within your agreed upon hours, as it was to get the job done.

He was the hardest working individual I ever met. And I thank him for the once-in-a-lifetime experience.

After that ... we both eventually left, found other jobs and even moved to other cities, however, we always stayed in touch; especially Dan. He would never let more than a couple of months go by without a phone call to catch up.

Never.

Over the years, Dan did have some problems with depression, but it never stopped him from following through with his commitments. It was that work ethic.

A few years after I moved to DC, he got a job as the Artistic Director at a Jewish community center outside of the city. It was great to have him near again; to meet for lunch again and refresh our friendship.

But ...

Dan always had wanderlust. He never seemed happy staying too long in one spot. He moved to other jobs, always hoping the grass would be greener at the next situation. But he finally did find joy and satisfaction in Charlotte, North Carolina where he ended up on the board of the Lesbian & Gay Community Center. His award winning work was recognized by the city for its enormous contribution to the city. Dan was so proud of that.

He was planning a huge fundraiser when he was taken down by a heart attack at 66 years old.

He was my friend.

- George Fulginiti-Shakar -

George!!

George was from Massachusetts. He was an impossibly talented music director ("NOT musical director!") and pianist. He could act AND sing AND tap dance. And he was a true mensch, if there ever was one. A darling man with an effortless laugh and an almost pathological need to organize.

We met in the early 1990's when I was doing a political/social satirical music revue called "The Mrs. Foggybottom Show" at the upscale Omni-Shoreham Hotel in Washington, DC. George had been subbed in as our music director/accompanist and stayed for a couple of months. Hitting it off immediately, we played off of each other like clockwork; on AND off the stage. He was the Tweedle Dee to my Tweedle Dum. We thought alike and we looked alike; well, at least in stature and coloring.

Although George was almost ten years older than me, he had the energy and demeanor of a twenty year old. And the crazy thing is he NEVER looked his age! Even though both his parents died at 60, George didn't inherit their infirmities and stayed young forever!

I know I said talented, but I need a word to go beyond that; gifted, accomplished, brilliant. All wrapped up in a caring, goofball of a guy!

We ended up doing a few shows together; me acting and he as music ("NOT musical!") director.

We also were on the board of directors of The DC Cabaret Network, an organization to support individual performers of cabaret music, of which George was president. He was organized to the nth degree, which, I have to say, is the best thing a group of artists needed. Thank goodness, for his skills!

I found our lives were constantly being interwoven by professional and social occasions and obligations.

However, my best and dearest time with George was when he needed a teaching partner at a local theatre school where he and a mutual friend had been instructing a class on cabaret performance. The friend was moving to Kansas City. They both thought of me as her replacement and I leapt at the opportunity. George and I were a TEAM! I am proud to say we influenced many a singer, coaxing and guiding them to be the best that they could be. And I am so proud of that work. I couldn't have done it without George.

In, what would be, the last year of teaching together, George confided in me that he had Parkinson's Disease. A true devastation for a person who needs to use their hands in the subtlest of ways. George tried an experimental surgery where an implant is put into the brain to stimulate cerebral activity. Well our poor George had a rare allergic

reaction to the implant and, even though it was removed in a second surgery, suffered from a long term brain infection.

His longtime partner and friend, Otis, struggled to care for George. However, because George was so beloved by everyone, they both found themselves surrounded by a cadre of caretakers.

The last time I saw him was after I had moved to Arizona. I was back in DC to direct a cabaret show for a friend. I visited George in a rehab hospital he had been moved to. When we saw each other, we cried. Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum weren't so "Dee" any more, and a little bit more "Dum". But he rallied enough to laugh a bit and recall our past adventures. He became our old George for just a short time.

And I was grateful.

He passed at 73 years old.

I loved George.

He was my friend.

- Elvira "Googs" Boscia Swits -

Our whole family called her Googs. I never knew why. I'm not sure she knew why. But Googs she was 'til the end.

Googs was my father's first cousin. Her father was my dad's Uncle John (whom I've scribbled about). Dad's mother, Mary (a/k/a Mae) and John were the oldest siblings of the Boscia clan, so naturally, their kids became the closest of pals.

Googs was one of five children; four girls and a boy. All the girls' first names began with an "E", but the boy was Nick; another "who knows why?"

Googs and my dad were best buddies.

She was petite and pretty; sweet and smart. And she LOVED her family! She would do ANYTHING for them. As the family grew and everyone got older, it didn't matter. Even when her heart got bad in her later years, she would go out of her way to help by cleaning or cooking or just keeping you company with good conversation.

She never left Schenectady. She married and had two children and lived her entire adult life only two houses from her parents' house.

As I was growing up, we would only see her when my grandmother, her Auntie Mae, was alive. After "Mom" (as I called her) passed, Googs' family never came over to our neck of the woods. Recently, I asked my dad why that was. He couldn't give me a reason. "Sometimes those things happen."

(ANOTHER "Who knows why?")

But dad would go over to her house, and, occasionally, as I grew into an adult, I would go over too. She was always the nicest, most inviting person. Her company made you smile.

In 2019, she had fallen and broken her hip. That summer, I had gone to a family wedding in New Jersey. However, I was determined to get up to Schenectady to visit friends and family who were “above and below the ground”. I managed to track down Googs in a rehab hospital. Poor lady, I shocked her when I walked into the room. She thought I was my father, Everard. Even though she was hurting and quite uncomfortable, she was still her wonderful, loving self. And, even in her late eighties and disabled, she managed to summon the energy to make the room light up.

was Googs.

She was a darling.

She was my cousin.

- Jim Morris -

I met Jim in Washington, DC in the early 1990's through one of my best friends, Cindy. A few years earlier, Cindy had worked for Jim at the Smithsonian's American History Museum, where Jim was in charge of a department overseeing the cataloguing and recording of the “American Songbook”. It was an immense undertaking, but Jim had the leadership skills and the passion to tackle the job.

While Jim was at the Smithsonian, he also created the “Folk Life Festival” which, to this day, attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Mall in Washington every year for a couple of weeks. He was the brains and the “brawn” behind making it possible.

Jim was such an interesting man. When he was a young fellow in the 1950's, he moved to New York City to be an opera singer. He had a fantastic baritone voice and manly good looks to attract the attention he would need for such a career. But, as we all know, things happen and the opportunities don't always present themselves and the dreams of an opera career was sidelined.

That said, however, Jim's voice did give him a good reputation in the recording and theatre industries.

One of my favorite stories he told from his recording days was when a pal of his called him up to ask him to do backup on a record with Peggy Lee. The song was “Lover” and Peggy wasn't crazy about doing it. Apparently, after a lot of coaxing and assuring, they got Peggy, along with Jim, in the studio. If you know the record, the lyrics come at a fairly fast speed over a manic bongo accompaniment. Take after take, she couldn't get it. So they broke for lunch. The producer took her out to eat and got her sloshed. When

they gathered back together again, she did it perfectly in one take. Jim can be heard as the solo male voice in the background singing, “aaaah, aaaah, aaah, aaaah”.

Jim’s other big claim to fame was that he was in the original cast of “My Fair Lady” on Broadway. He can be best heard on the cast album singing “Wouldn’t It Be Lovely” with Julie Andrews.

Anyway, I got to know Jim better when he first cast me in a series of music revues for the Smithsonian. They all featured American songs; the first being a show recreating material used during WWII by the USO. That was fun. My favorite, though, was the Rodgers and Hammerstein revue. That was because Jim trusted me enough to sing songs I would never otherwise get to sing in a professional setting: “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning” from “Oklahoma” and “’Tis a Puzlement” from “The King and I”.

But both my darling Danny and I truly got to know Jim and his wife, Cynthia, when they began to invite us, along with our mutual friend Cindy and most of their Smithsonian “gang” to their numerous and generous parties which always revolved around the holidays or birthdays. These huge events began while they lived outside of DC and kept on going even after they moved into their gorgeous Victorian home much farther out in the western region of Virginia or at their farm in the mountains in West Virginia. We especially loved going to West Virginia because it was (and is) SO gorgeous. As a matter of fact, if it hadn’t been for Jim and Cynthia, we would not have known about the vacation cabin on the top of a mountain we eventually purchased and owned for fifteen years.

As folks got older and we all were more spread out, the parties eventually were pared down to mostly a birthday bash in August. There were five of us friends and acquaintances, including Jim and I, whose birthdays were in August.

Jim was always so kind and attentive to me. His affectionate spirit and genuine interest always brought our friendship closer. His gentlemanly demeanor always gave way to a hearty laugh or a huge hug. He passed that wonderful warmth onto both of his sons, Jimmy and Adam.

Even after he retired completely, his need to be creative never stopped. He became deeply involved in the restoration of a mill in his new town in order to make it into a craft and antique center. He constantly worked on his memoirs. And always had his nose in something, driving Cynthia a little nuts sometimes.

But he remained the dignified gentleman with the good heart and a solid spirit until age and infirmity took him away.

He passed three weeks before his 93rd birthday.
He was my friend.

- Judy Wildman -

I didn't know Judy as well as I knew the other four folks in this tribute, but she was the type of person who had a huge effect on you, whether you knew her for three years or thirty.

Judy was probably the most genuinely dearest, most gentle spirit I have ever met. Her caring nature and sweet, sweet kindness sparkled all over her. She loved her husband Bob, making jewelry and beautiful flowers.

Judy was a lifelong friend of my darling Danny's and my good friend Cindy. They had grown up together and were lifelong best pals. Although Cindy and Judy grew up in Maryland, I didn't meet Judy until Danny and I started going to Jim and Cynthia's parties in Virginia. By coincidence, Judy had moved to the same little town as where Jim and Cynthia lived.

For a few years, Cynthia owned and ran a lovely little antique and curio shop in their chosen town of Edinburg. Cynthia knew of Judy through Cindy. I believe Judy first began to have her jewelry and knickknacks sold at Cynthia's shop. (That was my understanding anyway). One thing led to another, and she began working at the shop; eventually becoming one of Cynthia's right-hand women. That is where I met her. Then, because of the birthday bashes, I was able to enjoy her company.

Judy had an easy laugh and made you feel like you had known her all your life. She wasn't pushy or came on strong. She simply was a spot of warm sunshine that drew you in. I have a great memory of Cindy, Judy and I squished into a banquet table in Jim and Cynthia's kitchen, trying not to disturb the paraphernalia brought in for the party and having the BEST conversation consisting of silly and serious things. I left there with a huge smile on my face.

Very sadly, Judy battled a very rare and noxious cancer for years that caused her to jump from one round of chemo to an untried protocol to an experimental treatment.

This went on for many years. However, I learned strength and tenacity from her.

No matter how painful or tired or weary she was, she always tried to stay on the bright side. She wasn't a Pollyanna; she knew what she was facing. It was how she chose to live. She was constantly posting Facebook pictures of the new jewelry she made, or the flowers in her yard or the new quilt she received. She saw beauty in the beast and lived that way right up to the end.

Her light joined with those in Heaven just after marking her 66th birthday, surrounded by flowers sent by those who also had been touched by her spirit.

Judy's inspirational optimism still stays with me.

She was special.

She was my friend.

And so I end this tribute.

The lessons I learned from each of these people and the positivity and determination to live the best life one can is and will be what I choose to make part of my being.

I am incredibly lucky to have been a witness to their life journeys and for them to have shown me a brighter path. My greatest hope is to be able to pass those good lessons on to the folks who come to know me and think of me when I'm gone.

In celebration of life,
Stevie