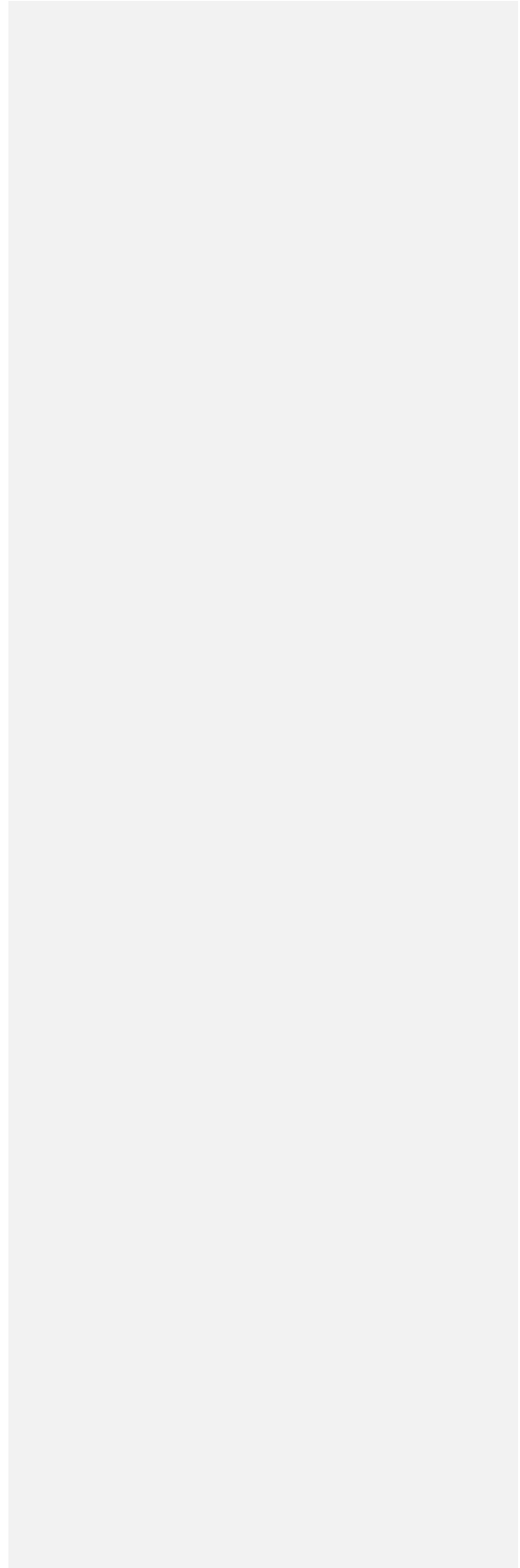


Me  
Myself  
And  
I  
A Memoir



Post-It Notes on box cover:

To be handed over to Larry; and as agreed,  
used at his discretion.

E.A.P.

Notes from Larry:

(221022)

Well, I'm finally starting on with reading Betty's memoir. This project is something she started about five years ago (probably around 2018 or so).

When she began discussing her writing this a few years ago, Jeannie and I both noted a sense of change in her persona. She was slowly evolving into a nicer person. We felt that this exercise was cathartic and helpful for her to get out on paper what she had kept inside all these years.

About 2020 or so, she confided in me that when she was done, she would give me the book, and I could choose to do with it what I please.

I didn't know what to do with this information. She didn't want her children to have it, nor did she just write it, then tear it up.

I promised her I would be considerate of her once I received it. When she finally gave it to me at the beginning of March 2022. I told her I would begin reading it immediately. This was the same time that Jeannie and I just started on our full-time RV journey. Between the travel and work, I set the book aside until now. I want her to know

that I read it before she passes and will connect with her on what I am reading as I go through her writing and notes.

I decided that rather than reading it, I will instead transcribe it fully onto this Word Document. That way, I can – If I choose – easily distribute it to others.

I don't know what I will read, but here goes.

–Larry

(I will attempt to recreate each chapter as best I can including her dates, notes, side comments, etc.)

The memoir came in a cardboard box with an elastic, gold colored ribbon around it. The box was taped shut. When I opened it there were thin cardboard panels with a Post-It note on each one “Part 1”, “Part 2”, etc. Under each panel was her writing on stationary paper. Each chapter was stapled in the upper corner with the page number in the same upper corner.

There was also an INDEX of the chapters with titles. The index was paper-clipped and created with manila mailing envelopes. She circled the number of the page that the chapter began on.



7/27/21

## IN RETROSPECT

After completing 400+ pages of this journal, I did what I would not do: I went back to the very first entry, knowing I'd immediately want to rewrite page after page.

Aside from the initial poor penmanship, which I corrected by switching to print, the process of revealing ones thoughts & feelings was akin to entering the confessional as a child. Consequently, these tentative opening chapters almost seem child-like; written in whispers.

## Chapter 1: House of Horrors

1

March 2019

Years and years ago, I started a journal – filled a composition book – and then destroyed it page by page.

Back then, living at home, it wasn't safe leaving any writings around. Once, looking for something in my mother's nightstand, I found a stack of letters my friend, Micheline, had sent from college. It was then, I guess I became a sleuth, searching out missing items of clothing, my everyday jottings, etc., which eventually expanded in the search for the hidden liquor bottles, which became my obsession; and I was damn good at it. Years later I was equally adept at finding (my) then husband's liquor stash – even those tiny bottles of paregoric conned from the medics.

2

Two reasons I decided to jot down this & that. My vision is failing at a fast rate, and I barely see what I'm writing. The second reason stems from an unsettling circumstance that dredges up memories of growing up with an unstable woman, whose words alone were a form of mental cruelty.

Anyway, I'm reminded of the apple not falling far from the tree.

My brother (5 yrs. younger) and I grew up in the same house, and he was aware that I was the target of her abuse; he became the favored one. The abuse was not physical, but words and actions intended to mentally abuse the competing female (me) in the midst... More on that later.

3

The phone was our mother's lifeline, especially once she was unable to drive. She would hear a story or witness an event; but was never satisfied in the simple telling. Art & I would listen in wonderment as she embellished & twisted facts to turn it into her story – her version of events.

Mostly, she loved being the injured party. She would spew hatred for someone not in agreement with her. “AND after all I did for HER!!” My father, who feared her the most, somehow found the guts to react when she expressed “hate” for someone. Otherwise, he was silent, except when too much drink turned him into a filthy mouthed cretin.

4

Many of those who knew my mother outside the home, saw a “saint in the making”. She would drag me along when visiting a child with palsy, who was placed on the blanket-cornered rug. My mother would get down on hands & knees then make cooing sounds to the delight of that child. Then, as always, as we sat down for the evening meal, we’d be held hostage to her pent-up tirades. “WE were ungrateful” ... “without her there wouldn’t be a roof over our heads”, etc, etc.

NOTE: In truth, she was right. She was a creative, hard-working woman, who saved her “best” for others. What we saw was an unhinged woman who only mellowed out when the expensive liquor she stole from her employers kicked in. (She blamed the carpenters, etc, when questioned).

5

Sometimes, in a mellow mood, she would hold me captive with tales of abuse suffered as a child. I chose to believe her as it better explained her excess drinking in the later years rather than blaming me. Yes, I drove her to it!

Later, my aunts set me straight by describing an older sister who spun imagined tales of abuse. My aunt told of finding a manuscript destined for True Confessions, containing sordid lies - - - which was how she hooked my dad! My grandmother describes how my dad – before he became a shell of himself – told her he was rescuing her daughter from a terrible life at home. “Good”, said Granny. “Take her & good riddance. But you’ll be back wishing you listened”.

And so he did express regrets to her in the end. (to Granny)

6

Years later, after my mother had died, and my dad was living with my brother, he took him back to the island<sup>1</sup> for a visit. My brother, regretfully, also took my dad back to the old homestead (The House of Horrors, in my memory) whereupon my dad screamed that wasn't his house, Granny's was his house. He then had a stroke.

Once, after working a cocktail party, my mother came home with an unfamiliar apron over her arm. "I was asked about the pretty apron I was wearing and I said you made it for me". What the...? I couldn't even thread a needle & she knew it. She hoped I'd grab the bait and ask why the lie, and she'd say it felt good to pretend she had a thoughtful daughter. Another way she "invented" me to people.

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<sup>1</sup> Fishers Island, New York is an island off the coast of Connecticut. Its nearest mainland town is New London, CT. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fishers\\_Island,\\_New\\_York](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fishers_Island,_New_York))

7

When my father worked nights, Art and I were often left to cope with madness. I'd often have to guide her sweaty naked body back to bed when she fell out. And in that state, she often cried out to my brother. He hated having to sleep with her and I convinced him to ignore her pleas.

Knowing it was my doing, and with my bedroom next to hers, she'd then raise the volume on the country western station, the twangs even too much for her. Then the sound of curtain rods crashing to the floor as she pulled down the drapes from both windows. Then, blessed silence.

But it was my father's reaction when he came home in the morning. There was my mother getting ready for work, oblivious

8

to the pile of drapes & rods piled on the floor.

My father, saying not a word, just heaving a sigh as he headed downstairs, then returning with hammer and nails.

Sometimes, when I was subjected to one of my mother's screaming tirades - - my father would hear me out & simply say, "I know kid, I know". Then I had the courage to confront him and demand why he didn't "stick up for me".

"Listen kid", he said, "A man has his needs. And if I speak up for you, your mom will deprive me of those needs". And so, my 12-year-old self got her first lesson in sex education from her dad. It was more graphic for my young brother, though, when he bore witness to drunken behavior. It was Dad getting rewarded!!!

## Chapter 2: Art Beat Me Again

9

On the nights when our dada worked, if our mom wasn't tearing down drapes, she had other activities: Calling his sisters, one by one. She'd tearfully recount the latest beating inflicted on her by their brother. "Art beat me again", she'd lament. My brother and I shaking (our) heads.

There was the urge on my part to run down the stairs, grab the phone from her and yell out "She's lying!". But oh, what hell to be paid then.

Other such nights, a gentleman friend would call. They sat in the kitchen, sharing (breios) and chatting far into the night. I knew they were all chaste encounters, because I kept vigilance from above, watching through the bathroom grate.

Once when my mother took my brother and I to a favorite

beach, the arrival of a local guy didn't seem surprising until I realized that it was a prearranged "date" with my mother. And to be forced to watch as they strolled into the water, my mother grabbing his hand as those itty-bitty waves hit her exposed skin. I, too, headed for the water, my intent to keep walking till the sea claimed my body. Glancing back, though, I laced an audience as I made my final exit. In retrospect, my mother would have loved the role of "grieving mother".

My brother, young as he was, often surprises me in recalling scenes from our little house of horrors. He – the chosen one – didn't relish the role, always seeking my comfort, not hers. Leaving him behind when I got married was not easy. My plan was a happily ever after escape; but as the saying goes: "Make plans and God laughs".

## Chapter 3: Midnight Strolls

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But there were other nights when a good old dad was home and I might have enjoyed a rare night of quiet sleep. Sometimes, though, on foggy nights, was the intermittent sound of fog horns piercing the night.

Something much preferable than my dad poking me awake.

Always, he'd be in a panic as my mom was on one of her "night walks", that she took her strolls in her sheer night gown, is why my dad made me go out and lead her back home. He would be too embarrassed seen with her.

So, I'd head out, following the road to Granny's house – her destination, and steer her back home. Oh, how I hated the feel of that sweaty body, the smell of alcohol fumes, except she was drunk walking, rather than supine on the bedroom floor.

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On the nights my mother did make it to Granny's house, I wasn't sure how she got back home – My uncle maybe managing somehow. But then it became too much.

“This has got to stop”, he announced. She scared the hell out of Granny entering the house at two A.M. (No one locked doors back then on the island). “So, I'm warning you. The next time she shows up, I'm calling John Gada” (our constable). You'd think this warning was directed at my dad, the responsible husband. But it was directed at me - - - the 12-year-old in the family, apparently, with the balls.

It wasn't the first or last time I've been misjudged in terms of possessing wisdom. In truth, I've been running like chicken little, always waiting for the sky to fall – for most of my life.

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Other nights the drama unfolded right in our parking lot. I'd be poke awake to hear my dad's voice announce in a panic that my mom was in the truck. She was threatening to drive off the ferry landing pier to her death.

Fingers crossed, I convinced him it's just to get attention; to go back to bed and she'd give up the act. Sure enough, - - Thank God!! - -

I heard her climb up the stairs to bed and not a word from my dad. But certainly, a sigh of relief that his daughter took charge.

Another night, though, and another poke, and the rules of the game had changed. After my sleepy words of wisdom, he said, "But kid, this time she was your dog!!"...

## Chapter 4: Change in Mother/Daughter Dynamics

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I knew a woman who off-handedly spoke of a dismal childhood spent with a mother confined to a wheelchair. No compassion there, just a resentment that the mother's needs were uppermost.

When I later in life joined Al-Anon, not only to purge all these past memories, but ask why I was reliving it all again in my marriage.

Although there was comfort in learning I wasn't responsible for other's actions, I'm not convinced alcoholism is a disease. Certainly not in league with that poor mother confined to a wheelchair.

As I entered my teens, the mother/daughter dynamic changed. As summer drew to an end and school was about to begin, my mother stopped the Sears Roebuck orders and began solo trips to New London for my school clothes.

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It all started one day when I entered my bedroom and saw a dizzying array of outfits spread on my bed - - sweaters, blouses, skirts, etc. - - All in my correct size. Before going on though there is this:

Never, until I was engaged to marry, was I ever allowed to visit the mainland, unlike my friends who often hopped the ferry to shop and lunch at the local tearoom. The why of this and other restrictions (other than a firm NO) led me to believe it enabled her total control over me. Surely, my death would end that control, so I couldn't ice skate with friends on the frozen pond in winter, or ride horseback with them in summer.

Anyway, I was thrilled over these store-bought clothes. So began the yearly buying spree and forced peck on the cheek (ugh!) The ultimate farce...

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So, each night I'd choose what to wear to school, carefully matching this with that... What a feeling to enter the classroom in these new clothes of the department store racks.

I can't recall if I was allowed one or two school weeks but came the morning - after my mother left for work - when I opened the closet and my chosen outfit was gone.

Then, home for lunch, there was my mother puttering about, wearing my outfit. Her look daring me to speak, I was then resigned to choosing what was available each morning. In time, those clothes ended up wadded in her bedroom, under the chair or the closet floor, etc. and I'd return to last year's Sears Roebuck wardrobe. This "sharing of clothes" continued throughout high school; the display on the bed; my grateful kiss and mom's joy at fitting into her daughter's clothes.

## Chapter 5: The Vibes (and dates with Senior hunks)

17

I'd often look at my mother. I wonder why certain men were attracted to her; of her ability to interact with the opposite sex that so alluded me but came so easily to her.

Later, when I became "single" again and was left floundering, other singles pointed out my failure to "send vibes" to the opposite sex – something my mother fine-tuned. In truth, I lacked the desire to form relationships of that sort. Once burned, etc...

Another example of how: When I entered my teens, the mother/daughter dynamic changed. In a recent conversation with my brother, Art, he expressed knowledge of our mother's outrageous flirtations. Nights a guy from school and I would be chatting in the dining room and my mother would float in like an ethereal spirit, wearing a silky,

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sheer nightgown. Once, in front of my then husband, she lifted her skirt to show off her new Playtex girdle. He was shocked, not only by her behavior, but my lack of response, other than a mere shrug of my shoulders.

By then I had stopped caring because of a previous episode that even today dredges up something beyond anger – more a feeling of hurt and bewilderment.

I was cleaning the kitchen, my usual Saturday task (once, my uncle came by and chastised my mother for not letting me be out with friends on such a warm, sunny day. I winced as no-one tells her what to do and so she then piled on the chores).

So, this A.M., I was on kitchen duty, scrubbing like Cinderella, when the kitchen door opened (our homes only entrance). Looking

up, I saw two hunky senior guys enter the room, not bothering to knock or say hi. Golf bags slung over shoulders. I was honestly perplexed, then in shock as my bother waltzed into the kitchen shouldering her golf clubs. ‘My God’, I thought, ‘She’s going on a (not the first) golf date with the guys I fantasized dating’.

These guys had gotten drafted during the Korean War and after discharge returned to Fishers Island to finish their Senior year. I looked at her, all fresh and clean, tiny bow adorning curly, coiffed hair, and looking oh-so-smug...

Yet, the knife had to go in deeper. She scolded me in front of them, pointing out my half-assed effort, I guess. Then, with a toss of head, bemoaning aloud the burden of raising daughters. To this day, that memory still lingers.

Hiding clothes was just another way, I believe, to assert control – or express hidden rage. When I returned from my honeymoon in Vermont, I entered my childhood bedroom for the final time to collect the remainder of my “trousseau”. But many items were missing, especially the lacey nightgowns.

So, while my mother did “pretend” stuff downstairs, I simply retrieved what was mine from under her mattress, chair cushion, wadded in the closet, etc. Surely, she knew when I came downstairs, suitcase in hand, that the “game” had played out. I sometimes wonder if a room full of shrinks could figure her out, or if it was simply some kind of jealous fury of a daughter too meek to speak up, so lacking self-confidence, so belittled by scathing put-downs???

## Chapter 6: College That Wasn't

21

As graduation neared, the college talk, on my part, evolved. I can't believe how naïve I was in thinking this was a given. She caught me mid-sentence one day with the words, "You are not going to college!!"

Then she laid out her plans:

She would finance secretarial school in New London. She'd drive me to the ferry landing (her favorite drive-off spot) in the A.M., pick me up at days end. Then, after graduation, she would arrange a job for me at the F.I. (Fishers Island) Farms – A dead end for those slated to never leave the island. (Note: Years later, an uncle told me how disappointed he was when he approached my mother offering to finance my college education. And how my mother told him that it was just a phase and that I had lost interest.... "WHY NOT ASK ME!!!

I was the first grandchild on my mother's side (the) center of attention by aunts and uncles as well. My earliest memories though, were being prodded by my mother to dance for people I don't recall knowing. I'd be lifted up on a type of stage, my mother telling me to dance, her arms giving twirling gestures. I'd shake my head 'NO NO' and be met with those icy stares that said, "Do it, or else!"

Her favorite form of punishment was to grab me by the ear and drag me along as I tried to keep pace. Anyway, I'd twirl around as best I could, eyes glued on my mother's satisfied face.

Over the years, I often heard mention in hushed tones of a bar my dad once owned on the island. Something happened – the bar shut down and my parents along with me, left the island and headed for the mainland.

When I was older and living with my grandmother, she'd sort of whisper stories of that bar. How dad would conduct contests with the male patrons; each slapping his penis on the bar – the largest, no doubt winning a free beer.

But what disturbed Granny the most was forcing me, A TODDLER, to stand atop the bar and dance for the patrons. It disgusted me to think my parents used me to entertain the rowdy folks at the bar; yet having witnessed their total abandon when drunk.... Why not??

Throughout high school, I had high hopes of going to college. In the summers, I often mingled with the young college crowd working jobs to pay tuition. Some were local, but others answering ads on college campuses.

There were also young guys straight out of West Side Story, recruited for jobs like golf caddies, etc. They had a certain way of strutting around, talking the (West Side Story) talk. I befriended a couple who were rather sweet – maybe over doing the act of perfect gentlemen. My Fonzies long before “Happy Days”.

I also befriended the young man, a pharmacy student, from Fordham (University), who was a caddie’s medic and supervisor. He was a studious looking guy, wearing thick, black-rimmed glasses. Certainly not a James Dean type.

Anyway, my mother certainly knew my enthusiasm for college and a major in Journalism. Looking back, I would have made a terrible journalist, poking into private lives (and) asking invasive questions. But maybe I would have evolved into a decent writer – enough to make a living... maybe.

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I had boyfriends – one young sailor, Bill Gill, stationed with a small contingent on the island. He was a sweet guy, but after a good length of time, I was frustrated that he never tried to kiss me... maybe I lacked those “vibes” previously mentioned.

Then a guy from the Coast Guard – a bit wild – who drew anger by calling collect from the mainland. I once, however, took advantage of my mother’s drunken state to ask permission to attend a party and got a drunken nod from her.

Along with an uncle, a fellow cheerleader, we were driven to the Coast Guard station. Just us and maybe five guys, including mine. Somehow it got a bit drunk. Anne left and I was left with the drunkest one of all – my soon-to-be ex-boyfriend.

## 26 (The Southern Drawl)

Somehow, I got home, and yet continued to see him. Was it his southern drawl, or again was it a bit of wildness? Given my life, so far, I should have been drawn to the sober, nice guys. I did pal around with all the guys I grew up with and dated a couple.

It's worth a mention that Sweet Bill Gill married a family friend (my aunts), who was ten years older. After I married, we couples were stationed together in Norfolk, VA, and Bill became my son's Godfather.

As for my Coast Guard guys, it was after I had married and was on the island staying at Granny's, that my uncle answered the phone, handing it to me, and he said in a stern voice that it was my old boyfriend – the one with the southern drawl.

How he knew I was back on the island is an example of that island's mysterious lore. How, like drumbeats in the jungle, news quickly circulated - - Fishermen hiding the short (illegal) lobsters preferred by the summer crowd (they're tastier). When warned, the inspector was aboard the next ferry, etc. etc.

Malicious lies, once dormant, can resurface and be revealed like debris from the ocean bottom at low tide and its smell of rot. Such was the case of my last and final visit to the island many years later, but more of that later.

Once my mother set me straight regarding college, I turned to my faltering Catholicism and started novenas in hopes of rescue from a hopeless future given that I learned years later.

## Chapter 7: The Sailor Named “Clem”

28

That the human brain isn't fully developed until the age of 21, I'd have fared the same seeking help from a fortune teller.

I don't recall meeting the young sailor called Clem – He was part of Bill Gill's Naval contingent – A radar station atop the highest hill overlooking Long Island Sound. Was he the answer to my prayers? Let's just say I made him so.

He certainly wasn't the “Fonzie” type previously mentioned, maybe more a James Dean type, but to my dismay, one with a smoldering temper yet to be revealed. I recall my uncle warning me about “experienced city types”, which, to me, translated into a “mature” type.

I had now set my sights on marriage, finding “Mr. Right”, etc.

I recently learned that there are those like myself who yearned to be married. The identity of being someone's wife; the comfort of a man by my side – a nourishing presence. And, of course, that house with the white picket fence, children of my own, the family dog, etc. My false expectations certainly drew from those lovely family shows on T.V. – the negative examples observed in my youth, a fluke.

When my family moved to the peninsula – the part of the island not yet connected to electricity and plumbing, I was devastated. I'd been living with Granny and those luxuries. And now, doing homework by kerosene lamp.

## Chapter 8: Earl Evans

30

There was a large family close by – an enigma in that it was composed of at least six children (imagine that!!).

There were others as well living in places not yet connected. And lots of sand. And there was Earl Evans, who lived with his mother in a small house-sitting part over the water.

Today it all sounds so serene, so close to the water; rowboats at the ready to reach the other side; sea gulls; fishing boats chugging by. Personally, it was so isolated – I'd look across at Granny's house, so near yet so far and all my childhood friends separated by that stretch of water.

My one true friend on that peninsula – a refuge, I came to believe, for poor people - Earl and I would hang out. A lot. Young kids, maybe nine or ten, sometimes with a couple of the

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“Big family” kids. There was a large wooded area; ideal for our tree fort (years later, an uncle bought that vacant lot).

When I was house bound with a nasty bout of Impetigo – a contagious aberration covering my upper lip – Earl, undaunted, paid regular visits. He’d bring books to read, treats or just quietly keep me company.

I should mention that my parents did acquire a generator, its sound a background noise on the radio. Then a hurricane sent the sea into the fresh water well, the kitchen pump was replaced by faucets delivering piped in, paid for real water.

Eventually we moved away from the peninsula - to the House of Horrors. (Careful what you wish for.)

## Chapter 9: Earl Again

32

And Earl and I sort of lost contact – an example of that peninsula’s isolation.

When next we encountered each other, it was under strange circumstances. I was now engaged – ring on finger – and no longer filled with high expectations. I was in my room; my parents imbibing at the local beer hall. When I heard footsteps on the stairs, it seemed odd for an early return home. Instead, there was Earl standing in my doorway. Obviously, as he swayed back and forth, he too had visited the beer hall and knew my parents were still there.

I felt absolutely no fear, just anger. How dare he show up like that, knowing he was going to speak words I didn’t want to hear. Plain and simple: “Please don’t marry that guy.”

## Chapter 10: Earl Again. Drink, then Jealousy rears. The two-headed snake

33

When I first started seeing Sailor Clem, it was rather romantic to be strolling along near the golf course – a road leading straight to the radar station. It was always in hope the grey truck, “USN” painted on its side, would be heading to or from the station.

If so, he’d pull up and lean out, James Dean-like, and we’d exchange words & looks. Yet I was also becoming aware he liked to drink.

Once - parked at night up at that radar station – he downed a quart of beer, then dashed to a nearby bush to upchuck it all.

Not romantic at all, but I tried to separate one kind of drinking from another. Beer was the drink of choice in my extended family. During holidays, we kids would make the rounds, getting sips of the foamy stuff from one and all.

My father was a heavy smoker, but I had no interest in that, or drinking. How ironic that I began both living among my in-laws

After my engagement became known, the locals would warmly offer congratulations. I won't deny my elevated status stemmed from my mother burning the phone wires. My soon-to-be father-in-law was a retired Army Colonel and vice-president of a tug (boat) firm in New York City. And, yes, I gloried in showing my mother I could rise above her low expectations of me. Or did I?

I recall a male friend approaching my Clem and I and giving me a big congratulations hug and almost finding himself thrown to the ground. Some gals would say such jealous rage was proof of love. No way. It was the beginning of a trait so dismally witnessed in my dad:

A passive acceptance of things beyond my control.

The Insurance Man reaching over to fit a puzzle piece I was working on. The milkman entering without knocking (at us busy mothers request). Oh, yes, the sweet Pharmacy guy in charge of the candies; the delivery guy who worked with me at my summer job; the chubby married son of a well-to-do family who insisted he learn responsibility and his insistence that I visit he and (his) wife in ritzy Connecticut. There were others. All told to back off at their slightest touch.

Years later, in East Rockaway (NY), Sweet Bill Gill had occasion to visit my husband and I in his mother's home. Happy to see him, I threw my arms around him in a warm embrace but was yanked away and left in abject shame. What welled up inside me by now was not anger but hurt and bewilderment.

What kept me going was determination to.... keep going.

The lies, the withholding of money, the drunken episodes that rivaled my mother's, the ever presence of that loaded gun – often aimed at his head – the invitation to “consensual” sex... or else.

Once, returning from his mom's – a place he truly preferred, he stood before me, hands in pockets, head down and delivered his mother's message: “My mother told me to tell you to stop having babies.” (I would, maybe, if her lovely son would stop raping me in a drunken stupor.) The priest even called it rape in the confessional. At the time, though, I expressed difficulty with the rhythm method due to his many absences. That was before the gunpoint episodes. Later, the sociopathic response when I finally went on birth control.

## Chapter 11: The Soldier and Other Asides

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That the island could accommodate so many people – especially in summer – with nary a traffic jam was amazing. Only now, it comes to mind that the majority of military<sup>2</sup> personnel had no cars.

Watching British war movies depicting the arrival of the “Yanks”; locals stepping aside as a contingent of young men jog past, was also play out on the island. So was the mingling with locals - spreading goodwill. Every home with a shelf, crammed with cases of Army issued rations.

The islander’s hospitality was also rewarded with precious items from the Army Exchange. Best of all was the local’s access to the Army operated movie theatre.

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<sup>2</sup> Fort H.G. Wright was a US Army military installation on Fishers Island, New York from 1898-1958 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort\\_H.\\_G.\\_Wright](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_H._G._Wright))

During evening showings, I always hoped for an air raid drill. The screen would darken, then the ominous warning to seek shelter. We'd then be marched to the underground bunker, where guys had set up a line of refreshments – hot coffee, donuts, cokes, chips, etc. So, we'd mingle till the "all clear".

Back to the theatre, we'd go (and watch) the completion of the movie. I relished these extended nights because if my mother was sober, the US Army was a solid excuse for staying out so late.

Otherwise, my late-night excursions went unnoticed if she were in a drunken stupor. Then, I'd head out, cross the golf course, skirting the known sand traps, all in pitch darkness and (I'd) reach the ocean.

The dog: a blur of white among the rocks as I sat facing the sound and fury of the Atlantic; the caw of a lone seagull above – always keeping watch. Just me in a million-dollar setting.

## Chapter 12: Parky

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In the summer, the Army feted the locals with free food and drinks on a patch of beach on the base. The sand, a dismal grey color from its other uses. My dad, whose daily beer allowance from his wife didn't stretch far (each day he'd pace back and forth in the kitchen waiting for her truck to pull up. It was like a fine-tuned dance really: She'd walk in, there would be no greeting, my dad still as a statue. Then she'd pull out her wallet, extract that precious one-dollar bill (maybe two?!). My dad would grab it from her hand and high tail it out the door, then dash across the street, through the cemetery, then along the

Well worn path I used to get to school. From there, his quickened pace would follow the sidewalk to the Pequot House entrance.

Imagine his strutting into the bar, greeted by calls of “Hey, Parky!”, his short stature swelling with pride as he became one with the guys. The bar was his confessional – The place to unload his woes, sometimes the guys would egg him on with free drinks, asking who really work the pants in the family... sending him home in a fury.

Once, his arrival was met with words of congratulations. Looking puzzled, it turned out he'd won a pay raise, then suffered the humiliation of being the last to know. That's because he hadn't seen a paycheck in years and years, because his wife had that authority. In fact, my dad had never made out a check in his life!

It's so easy to get sidetracked into the complexities and strangeness of my parents' relationship. No role model that!

There was an episode at one of those "free drinks" beach fetes. I happened to be standing alone, when I spotted my dad weaving his way in my direction. He was heavily drunk. My face must have registered the disdain I felt as approaching, he looked me straight in the eye and asked in his slurry, rancid tone, "Why the fuck don't you ever smile?!" ...

I would have just turned away except one of the older high school guys stopped to view the exchange. I was mortified. Then, he turned and walked away. How lovely if he had stayed and asked in concern if I was OK. In a movie, maybe, but not on the grey sands of that Army beach tucked away on a small island.

## Chapter 13: The Soldier and Aftermath

42

An example of the locals simpatico with the army was ho soldiers heading to and from the two drinking spots were often offered rides. Such was the case involving my mother and me.

She had just dropped my dad off at his job at the place called Reynard's (larger than the Pequot – with booths and room for dancing and with a juke box). Then, with me in the back seat, we headed to see a movie at the base. *(Note: Yes. We did "chum" around. Enough for me to hope those pleasant intervals would bring peace and harmony. It was such hope that sustained me through all those years of marriage, until, as the saying goes, "All hope was lost.)*

Spotting the guy heading back to base, my mom stopped and offered him a ride. That he ended up in the back seat with me I don't recollect. Certainly, in the telling, no one questioned my mother's lack of judgement. (*ad nauseum*).

In a swift move, he grabs hold of me and starts fingering my hair, but in the wrong color. When I indignantly correct him, he then claims the need for a close-up look and I'm suddenly thrust to the floor of the car, then I feel the bristle of his moustache; his wet lips...Today it still resonates that I was denied the experience of a girls first kiss – the consensual one.

I must have screamed; my mothers shrill voice ordering the guy out. She, no doubt, asking for a full account of my encounter. But no words of comfort. Instead, she continued on to the theatre and me still in the back seat.

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At my young age, even living with the crazy drunks, that encounter was beyond the scope of my imagination. I was probably in shock.

So, onto the theatre and an audience of uniformed guys; where in shaky voice, she played out the drama of what happened to her . . . daughter.

I don't recall the movie at all.

Instead of going home or at least allowing me that option, we headed back to Reynard's and another audience. This time I was in the front seat, window down as she headed inside. What happened next is probably why, after all these years, the solder incident remains fresh in my mind.

45

The door suddenly flew open and out came my burly uncle and not-so-burly father, each holding up the frame of my attacker.

Behind them, was my mother, her eyes ablaze with excitement.

Dragging him to the car, they held his head up to the open window and I was asked to identify him.

He was thrown to the ground and given a bloody beating. My uncle's blows doing the most damage. My dad's voice carrying more weight than his fists.

Turns out the guy had high-tailed it back to Reynards rather than stay visible on the road. I imagine my mother walking in later, eager for yet another audience and - Oh, JOY! – spotting him. (*Note: I was later told the guy was recently returned from combat.*)

## Chapter 14: No Stage Door Canteen That!

46

I don't recall when the Army base closed. It surely wasn't when my mother made her suicide runs down to the pier. Otherwise, the MPs would have escorted her home. It must have impacted the lives of the locals who worked there, including my dad at the power plant.

During the war years the Fort's population soared, including the Air Force overhead and silent vigil of LTA<sup>3</sup> blimps that could swoop low enough, so gals heard the flirtatious jives of the guys inside.

Personally, the glamour of it all eluded me; my body one of slow growth. For those my age, though, gaining entry to the "tea dances" required a bit of forethought.

Every Saturday, a group of mainland ladies would alight from the ferry and be escorted to the base's main club, to serve as not-so-friendly greeters.

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<sup>3</sup> LTA: Lighter Than Air

They were older by far than the young women awaiting entrance and with the sharp eye of a school nun. I'm sure they saw past the heavy make-up, padded bras and in my friend's case, the wobbly walk in borrowed high heels.

Only once did I allow myself to be coerced in that line. The ladies, showing strain at all the wannabees, just waved me inside with a weary sigh. Better they had sent me home.

Being in that room, feeling the eyes of all those uniformed guys on me, just scared the hell out of me. I was immediately asked to dance and could barely move my legs. All that maleness was too much, and I left. I did enjoy those romantic war movies though.

## Chapter 15: Where Did They All Come From

48

I wasn't much of a gad-about on the island in terms of visiting the homes of the locals. We girlfriends, of course, would visit back and forth, usually camped in the bedrooms. The only male friends visited (how odd). Our neighbors, The Lambs – composed of all boys – they were a sweet, quiet family. The parents running the tiny island market. It sold the basics, and unlike the bigger enterprise (one of several owned by the islands well-to-do local family), the boys laid-back parents kept the store as is.

Sometimes there'd be used plates left for days on the table, moved aside for clean ones. The boys grandfather lived with them; an old retired minister with a cheerful demeanor. He would often sit at the old out-of-tune upright piano and we would all sing from his book of hymns.

The house would never meet my mothers sanitary requirements, but it offered me peace. Again, I get side-tracked. The point is, I never had a sit-down visit in the homes of the majority of the locals. I feared my mother's depiction of me as the "bad seed" and shunned such encounters, *OR* I was just never invited in.

Throughout that summer as I seesawed back and forth regarding my feelings for "Clem", *Did he sense my changing moods?* Is that why he made me aware that his dad was one of those so-called "man-of-means"? And, like his dad, did he relish the idea of having a wife he could (jokingly) refer to as "The Clam Digger". I'd be Clam Digger #2.

All summer, the cloud of that secretarial school in New London and (being) chained to my mother suddenly lifted. *Did I gain prestige and finally best her?*

I was enabled, but still at home under my mother's watchful eye, when I asked permission to go out. Her usual, stern "NO" sent me crying to my – as usual – passive dad. I was, after all, an adult now. But his response was a tinbe (*sp*) off-center. There was something afoot though, an innocent enough reason to spin by Reynard's and enter a sort of Twilight Zone.

The room was rearranged; booths lined up against the wall, facing tables and behind those tables a sea of faces belonging to all those locals whose homes I had never entered – every one of them!

Two gals from school came and gave me a hug followed by a chorus of, "Surprise, Surprise!" But there was my mother, flitting about in her element.

To the side was a table set up, piled high with wrapped gifts.

No doubt the local hardware store had sold out. I was appalled and embarrassed. In a short six months' time, my life had become upended in events beyond my control. I just let them happen. Is that what is called "*In suspended animation?*"

It wasn't until I was on the ferry, heading for my honeymoon, that I could let out a sigh of relief. Thankfully, I had no idea how unprepared I was for what was ahead. (*Note: Considering I'd only recently been allowed to cross that ferry alone, the words to some folk song come to mind. Something about looking at the world from upside down, and it started on that ferry.*) Bernice, in boozy form, insisting that we should honeymoon in the city – not Vermont, so family could visit us. Giovi, meanwhile keeping a firm grip as her body kept sliding off the seat.

## Chapter 16: Mommie Dearest

52

Sometimes my mother would get something called “A bee in her bonnet”; a thing that had to be shaken out. Who knows what brought it on. My brother and I would be invited to a sit-down - he, my silent shadow - and wait for that familiar clearing of the throat.

Ah, the suffering my mother endured at the hands of a cruel mother. How she, the eldest daughter, was forced to do all the chores while her younger sisters played. And, if exhausted and she fell short, the ultimate punishment awaited. She was forced to kneel in a corner on a bed of rice till the sharp kernels caused her knees to bleed. *(Note: I since learned that this was a common punishment – old country style.)*

Anyway, to atone for our poor mother’s past suffering, my brother and I were forbidden from ever speaking to our grandmother.

Her greatest triumph in this matter came when she marched into church where, as ordered, we avoided eye contact with Granny and others in the family pew and slid into another all our own. My dad, of course, complied, fearful of being denied his “manly needs”.

Eventually, it all fizzled out. Someone forgot and spoke. Others joined in. My mother, oblivious to it all. She now had other bees buzzing around. (When my brother and I were free to hug and apologize to Granny, she wept and said she knew we were too afraid.) Looking back, it’s hard to imagine the collective fear my mother generated. I often wonder if her cozy relationship with the summer crowd and the mail contingent she attracted gave her immunity. *(Note: On my final visit to Fishers Island, after a 21-year absence, my mother, via the phone had set the lines afire with tales of my rich “Malibu” life and the lack of financial help (I was on welfare at the time)).*

## Chapter 17: The Engagement

54

In the last years of high school, I wasn't thumbing through bridal magazines, imagining my own elaborate wedding (*Like that would happen*), followed by an elaborate honeymoon. But when college became a dead issue, the secretarial school (became) a tight chain around my neck. My only hope was a suitable marriage. *Did I rush into things? Oh my, YES!* On second thought, who rushed who?

I don't recall a marriage proposal: No hearts and flower thing. In that happy-lopey manner often exhibited, which I found "endearing", he had let it be known he was not into public displays of affection (*Note: only ones of jealousy*). At the most, I might expect a single rose – not a bouquet. So John Wayne-ish.

I just never imagined there would be certain procedures in place, ordained by others and spun out like a movie. Surely, it was even beyond my mothers direction.

Bill, once known as Clem, was assigned the task of heading to East Rockaway (New York) for “The Ring”. Its origin soon to be the talk of Fishers Island (*Note: Years later, he laughingly related how he tried to date an ex-girlfriend; was soundly reprimanded by his brothers-in-law*). His mom, who held the ring, had arranged its purchase through a friend who happened to own a chain of jewelry stores (In my mind I tried to sort through such extreme opposites: the son; A 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Class Sailor; His mom, who hob-nobbed with high society – not to mention his dad’s status). This difference in status was a constant strain in our marriage. He versus the brothers-in-law.

Anyway, Bill would get the ring at a discount, due to a flaw in the diamond – a tiny yellow cast unseen by the naked eye. As it garnered attention, I could only imagine the thoughts swirling through my mother's head (As for me, I don't recall the ring being slipped on my finger). *Was she jealous?* That possibility comes to mind as I recall an incident many years later (as follows):

My mother, in a surprise gesture, handed me a diamond ring that I don't recall ever seeing before, and asked (for) it to be given to my eldest son, then a college student. So, where did the not-so-cheap diamond ring come from? Many, many years ago, after my fancy bling ownership, she went and bought one for herself (Seldom worn as fingers swelled from drink and kept locked away).

## Chapter 18: Hunters and Fishermen

57

He and I had driven up to that familiar high point on the island, offering a lovely view of the sea. That day, a hawk circled above, maybe ready to pounce on a rodent!

He had brought a rifle along, something from home in East Rockaway, and it was time to initiate me to the Clemente Hunting Skills. Load up, ready, aim, fire and down came that lovely hawk, almost at my feet. He lifted its wings and invited me to admire, close-up the glory of nature... Ah, those talons!!

I still wonder at stilling the heartbeat of a creature merely to admire it. Lions and tigers come to mind. He had this attitude about the males in my family – his being the Hunters and mine (the) lowly Fishermen.

## Chapter 19: It's A Long, Long While from June to December

58

Well, the ring was on my finger and, believe it or not, I had yet to graduate. There is a picture of our senior class, all decked out for the trip to Washington D.C. (Note: The White House was closed as the Truman Balcony was being built. The bus had to leave, and we missed climbing the Washington Monument.) Anyway, the fact that I did get to graduate and while still a virgin to boot should have been a ticket to college.

There were definitely protocols involved in that journey to the altar. I don't recall being asked my input in anything or offering any. One day, my intended announced he was taking me to Long Island to meet his family. Looking back, I wonder how I was able to go along with things, yet not panic.

According to the dictionary, I stayed suspended – able to hold in an undetermined state.

I recall being surprised at how small the house was. Much later, when my mother visited, she had a field day; phone in hand, reporting that the family turned out to be “poor as church mice”!

Dad, as I was to call him, although a successful businessman, did not stray far from his roots. There were two houses on the property: one for living and the other – which seemed bigger to me - for dad’s weekend puttering. He was constantly working on it, though he idled a lot in the well-equipped carpenter’s shed. There was also a separate garage, this holding the newest model car - a yearly trade-in the family jokingly called, “The Sixth Fleet”! It came out for weddings and funerals.

It was an old street with old houses, and maybe a certain smell in the air drew me further down the block. And there it was: The Atlantic Ocean. Fishing boats bobbing in the water, moored to the docks. There was even a little “Pequot” drinking hole, East Rockaway style. This clam digger #2 had come full circle.

Anyway, I digress, as the saying goes. In truth, I recall little beyond our pulling into the driveway of his family home. No doubt I was on “display” in the kitchen, which I came to know as “the heart” of the place – the gathering together spot.

Mother, as I was to call her, is the voice I recall, asking in a soothing voice, if we enjoyed nice weather along the way. In time, though, as I got to slowly take in all of them –

including the sisters, their husbands, and the one called Aunt Til – who lived there, I did detect an air of upper-middle class status.

I often recalled Uncle Ted's warning about my being ill-prepared for those "city types". But, in the throes of love, I believed my husband would guide me along the way, step by step (only if pigs could fly).

On that first visit to East Rockaway we did make a social call. Was it pre-arranged? I just recall sitting in a room full of his friends; me in a prim little outfit, wearing sensible pumps and not a one making eye contact with me. One gal, though did fascinate me as she described an errant husband who stayed out far too long, and how she called the police to report him missing (in later years, I wished I had her set of balls!!!)

## Chapter 20: The Visit – His Parents

62

Again, I zombie walked through another one of those protocols. His parents were coming to the island as my parents' house guests... To the House of Horrors....

Would my father remember to zip up his fly? My mother not to booze it up? When did a simple wedding evolve into a movie like production? Only now, though, I wonder if my future in-laws might have offered my mother a check to cover expenses. If so, it didn't bar (sp?) them any extra wedding invitations.

For the wedding couple, we got none. My mother was no doubt pissed at the number of party crashers. Absent from all the hoopla was any mention of a wedding gown. That expense my mother declined. I had no money, so borrowed the ensemble piece by piece and do believe I made a charming bride.

## Chapter 21: Bless Me Father

63

The one duty I was more than happy to perform, was a visit to the priest to begin announcing the bans of marriage. This protocol, I think, required to be done two Sundays in a row.

Ordinarily, an island priest loves a wedding ceremony - especially one in the dead of a dreary winter - so I expected a happy smile on Father judges face. Instead, a look of anger crossed his face. "I do not", he growled, "perform the sacrament of marriage between a Catholic and a Jew"! I recalled meeting him once as he was retuning from the mainland, dressed in his clerical suit. I told him he had a little bug on his shoulder, and reached up to brush it away. "It's probably from those filthy Jews sitting next to me on the bus". But good try, mom, playing the Jew card.

## Chapter 22: A Bit of Naughty Behavior

64

Eleanor and I became friends before when I was sent to live with my grandmother. Her parents came over quite often to spend an evening playing pinochle with Granny and Grandpa. Grandpa beforehand would grab the beer jug, follow the shortcut path to the Pequot House and get a pre-fill from the tap. And while the adults played cards, Eleanor and I hung out.

It's strange, I can recall just one memory of us playing Doctor – a once back and forth pretend game. I lifted Eleanor's shirt and instead of the usual flat surface with tiny red dots, Eleanor had sprouted those large bright rose buds. I quickly lowered her shirt and said I was through playing, and couldn't bring myself to ask if she did or didn't notice those sprouts.

65

That memory often came to mind as I played Lackey to Eleanor's racing hormones. Maybe if I had been less cooperative in her pursuit of males, she might have graduated with me.

I often spent time at her place - a small apartment above the garage that housed the cars her dad's chauffeured for Mrs. Pendleton, an island dowager. She (Mrs. Pendleton) lived in a mansion across the way, but was more often on the other side, dressed in baggy clothes, tending to her beautiful gardens. Which Eleanor and I had free use of. There was a Japanese gardener, (He and his wife just up and left for good after World War II began) and a Japanese tea house.

Eleanor had an older sister, Helen. The girls shared a small bedroom. Helen was quiet and studious. Later she became a nurse during the war.

Helen was also deeply religious and taught Sunday school. The contrast between the girls was so evident: Once when Helen was elsewhere, Eleanor found where she hid the upcoming Sunday school tests and read the questions out loud to me. I should have covered my ears but didn't. Later, she brought forth Helen's nursing text with candid pictures of the birthing process. Looking back, Eleanor did not share the pangs of guilt (that were) so much a part of our Catholic upbringing. She just seemed driven in her pursuit of men - the ones in uniform.

I was her Patsy, of course. Just as happens today. At least I was her limited helpmate via use of my phone and being with her when I wasn't. Today, friends played dangerous games via the Internet. Yet Eleanor risked meeting my soldier boy counterpart.

If I could pinpoint when our friendship began to fade, it would be the evening religious study class. As usual, Eleanor would stop at the foot of the hill leading up to Our Lady of Grace. As I continued uphill, I glanced back and see the young man appear on cue and the two head off.

It boggles the mind how she was able to strategize those encounters. (One guy's wife was in labor in some far-off hospital and Eleanor provided TLC). That she lived near the base was handy, but I never asked how she made contact without raising eyebrows.

Anyway, this is study night, I came up the basement steps followed by the priest. And as we stood together, looking below, there was Eleanor. On cue, bidding farewell to her latest date, I felt shame then because he knew I had been covering for her.

## Chapter 23: It Must Be A Tumor!

68

Eleanor never offered to hook me up with anyone in her sphere. Either she didn't want to share, or knew I wasn't interested in. Her soldier types. The only types that interested me were out playing golf with my mother.

It was a gradual thing, the lump under her sweater. Her wardrobe was limited as far as loose clothing was available. It wasn't as if any of us would offer her something loose fitting, as that would validate the obvious.

Then came news of the pending arrival of the medical team from the mainland. This yearly event to poke and probe the student body, to ascertain our fitness. The guys liked to joke about their gonads being fondled and the gals a brief poke of the female mound. We all hated that cattle call.

Much buzzing amongst Eleanor's classmates. Will the doctors suddenly call a halt and whisk Eleanor off to confab? I crossed my fingers as I was steadfast in the belief that she had a tumor. But nothing held up the line and we all let out a collective breath. Eleanor, though, took pains to mention that she was asked if her abdomen usually swelled. "Yes, during her period." One wonders if she actually wore a sanitary belt and napkin. If so, it was all for naught. A month or so later, she gave birth to a baby girl. One can only imagine the shock and bewilderment when her parents realized their daughter was in labor. It happened so fast: The trip to the mainland hospital via the Coast Guard; Her dad's controlled temper as Chris was yanked from his barracks, and Father Judge's bedside marriage ceremony.

## Chapter 24: In Retrospect

70

When I look back, it's through the eyes and mind of a 19-20 year old. I can't wonder how I allowed myself to be placed in the in-laws home as some pre-planned agreement. But I can wonder how it all came about.

How naive of me to assume the family couldn't wait to welcome me with open arms. To bear the responsibility of caring for this young married thing while the sailor went to sea. In retrospect, he dumped me there and tried to keep me in their sight while he roamed at will. His long-term plan was for me to keep his nest warm there in East Rockaway - to the only place he would ever call home. (No matter where we lived. East Rockaway was the only home address he ever wrote down).

## Chapter 25: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

71

The happiest time in my whole life was that spent with his family in East Rockaway. I came to adore “Meem”, my mother-in-law. Though she bore the formal title of “mother”. Of the 1001 bones of contention my husband threw at me this was the earliest:

Where I came from, “Mommy” was a standard. Even my grandchildren use it today. My husband would make a sneering comment whenever I uttered the word, along with the way I pronounced all of the things. The word “coat hanger” (?). All rather humorous as I tried to stay afloat in that sea of thick Long Island accents. In truth - in painful truth - the happiest times for me were those when he wasn't around. When it was just me and the family.

Before his first deployment, I got to see how he interacted with his family. At times I felt like the intruder in the midst. And he was “Little Billy”, marking his territory. The most embarrassing was when he would return late at night while the house was asleep. I'd arise first to join others in the kitchen or stumble on his pile of clothes scattered where here and there, including underwear. All seen by others or meant to be seen!!

Once, while gathered with family, I was soundly reprimanded for uttering a word while his sister Bernice (his drinking pal) was speaking. This surely went up a notch if I dared invade his space when he conferred with his dad –A love, hate relationship that often snared me in its net.

As a newlywed, I wasn't versed, (but who is?) in the rules of marriage. Aside from over-solemn vows, the relationship between husband and wife should be one of mutual respect and concern for the well-being of each other. I would have been most uncomfortable with too much attentiveness. Slobbery displays of love are just icky. I did learn, though, that a partners overwhelming need and demand for respect doesn't mean he returns in kind.

Early on, my sense of intrusion continued. He'd disappear at times, and it was left to his mother to tell me where he was. "He's gone to see who?", I would ask. To coin an expression. I was often the potted plant in the room.

## Chapter 26: Episode in Vermont

74

I recall a rare time when it was just my husband, his mother and I in that usually crowded house in Vermont. He was truly king of the hill. Meem and I were in the kitchen when he breezed through, mumbling something about heading down to see Pete. (I forgot his real name but did meet Pete on our honeymoon. He was a local.)

Again, we were still newlyweds and hadn't done much of anything together. I kept waiting for the sounds of the car pulling into the driveway; the only mode of transportation. The hours went by, then darkness began to fall. I expressed concern to Meem, trying to gauge her thoughts. Had they gone hunting? Were they lost in the woods, eaten by a bear, etcetera? Finally, we both just went to bed,

I thought of that gal in East Rockaway, who called the police on her missing husband and imagined myself taking the high road. I'd throw on a jacket, grab a flashlight and head down that steep mountain road; ever mindful of bear lurking about. Reaching Pete's house, I'd bang on the door with the flashlight, pieces of it flying in all directions. The door would open, revealing my bleary-eyed husband, his face contorting with anger as he realized the audacity of my showing up clad in nightclothes.

Instead, I arose at 5:00 AM and found Meem in the kitchen making coffee. Around 7:00 AM the bleary-eyed one showed up without a word. He hit the bed and slept through most of the day. Two full days in Vermont devoted to his hungover absence and no pleasant memories.

## Chapter 27: The Best of Times

76

He was deployed, I was pregnant & settling in with his family... Meem took me under her wing & my real experiences began – though the Long Island Railroad was not my favorite one. But it was the only way to New York City & the Department Stores...

We went to Macy's, where Meem ordered not bags, but cases of home supplies — Kleenex, soap powder, etc. which were delivered next day to East Rockaway... We stopped at a make-up counter as I watched her face contoured, shaped, creamed and rouged, then to the hair salon where I grudgingly allowed a so-gay guy to turn my hair into tight wad of spit curls & squeal in delight.

Thankfully, it was pouring rain when we exited, & I let Mother Nature undo the mess. I recall walking down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue & asking Meem to point out the mink coats.

NOTE: That NYC trip did stir up an unpleasant memory of an earlier, shorter one: Maybe we were changing trains, going station-to-station, but I recall grabbing my husband's arm as we stepped out to that sea of horn-blowing traffic & multitudes of people hurrying to cross on all sides... It was a bone of contention that my short legs were no match for his longer ones, and I'd always remind him to slow down so I could keep pace.

Anyway, the light changed, and he told me to follow straight ahead. Then, his pace quickened & he was no more as I struggled against the multitudes... Then came an opening & clear view of the sidewalk ahead & him standing there laughing. The trips I later made to the city were always with others, never him—except for driving through.

78

In our many talks together, it was Meem who broached the topic of her husband's infidelity (I had heard of it from my husband & how it rocked the family).

Often a service members trunk would arrive home before its owner, & such was the case with his.

I don't know the circumstances (re: its opening, who had the key, etc). Usually, the loving spouse held her nose as she retrieved a load of dirty laundry thrown in a the last minute.

Anyway, it was Meem and another daughter who, no doubt, were anxious to get that dirty laundry (both daughters also had husbands in the military)... I can only imagine the shock of fining torrid love letters from a mistress among those rolled up socks & T-shirts... Surely, he didn't expect that trunk to be opened & there would be hell to pay for invading his privacy...

79

How typical of both men – the father/son duo – to find a way to foist their guilty actions on others... I soon learned when folding dad's laundry to leave it on his dresser, never in. His retaliation for her opening his trunk was to never open his dresser, search his pockets, etc...

How could she be so cooperative when he cheated on her? In that & all things she chose to overlook in his treatment of her, she clung to her constant mantra: "Peace at any price". In time, I, too, followed suit... In the end, when he called me a "fish" for believing all his lies, I was merely striving to keep that peace.

For father & son, such a philosophy would be deemed genuine weakness, (ie. We were plain stupid!!)

Maybe so...

80

Aunt Til, Meem's sister, who lived in the house for many years, often got choice tickets to Broadway shows, which she gave to Bernice & Babs... Twice, when Bernice couldn't make it, Babs invited me along. And so, I experienced the thrill of Broadway; clinging to her as we left the train, hopped the subway and walked those steps to the theater.

I noticed the front seaters milling around; laid back patrons who obviously knew each other; probably commuting by train from the suburbs. Not a one staring wide-eyed at this 1<sup>st</sup> glimpse I was experiencing – even (oh no!) paint peeling off the walls. I guess the “Arts” were not well-funded.

The musical was “The Flower Drum Song” & I got to see one more – Some French Review with the usual French naughtiness.

Once, while Meem's friend from VT was visiting, dad called from the city to tell us all to be dressed & ready. A limo would be arriving to pick us up and deliver us to the (infamous) Athletic Club in the city. I'd read about it, and here I was entering its not so imposing surroundings,, greeted by the oh-so-formal Major Domo type & lead to our reserved seats... I was far more impressed when entering the ladies room: There, in all its majesty, was the Statue of Liberty, shining bright in the dark of the night – so close I felt I could reach out & touch it...

Later, the limo took us to Chapiqua (*spelling off, but present home of Bill & Hillary Clinton*) & a visit with dad's business friend, whose wife I liked...

We enjoyed philosophical chats re. my choosing kids & cloth coats over the luxury of expensive fur.

82

NOTE: I hate it when my spelling's off, but I can barely read the dictionary now – even with a magnifying glass...

Although I was fearful of travelling alone, I did take the train alone to St. Albans for medical check-ups & did make one last trip to VT before delivering our 1<sup>st</sup> born. I believe Meem's poker group was there, which leads to an interesting story of how I came to meet them:

They were all widows, including the aforementioned Marie Bush. All living somewhat comfortably, or so it seemed. How they met is unknown, but every Friday, they gathered at one another's home to play poker, enjoy coffee & a sugary repass and then a meal at wherever the hostess chose...

When they met at Meem's, it was rather hilarious to witness:

I never saw hard cash displayed, but there were some tearful displays over penny ante losses. In VT, the drama really escalated when the ladies' mixed cocktails with the game.

On Fishers Island, such imbibing could escalate in fist fights, but here it was just fraught with (hilarious) drama...

For whatever reason, I soon sensed a rise in tension on Meem's poker nights. Dad hated them, and - it seemed - her time with "the girls". When Meme hosted the game, it was a must to remove all signs. Once, when Dad returned home, he held up a forgotten sugar bowl. "Ah, I see the Poker Girls were here" ...

I, too, came to hate poker nights - when Meem would leave to enjoy dinner with the girls at a restaurant. Because I was now living at the house, I had become aware of the Friday night calls.

Sometime in the past, the mistress became aware of Meem's Friday Poker Games & Dinner Dates... Maybe Dad even arranged the calls. Whatever, she would call & speak to whoever had the misfortune to pick up. (If Dad were alone, I wondered if he would pick up)... So, on one such nite, while Dad watched TV, the phone rang and I nervously picked up... At my hello, she immediately launched into a slurry rampage extolling how beneficial she was to "Will" at his various postings, while I nervously kept an eye on "Will", hoping he stayed put in his chair. I feared hanging up, lest she just keep calling. Did he know I was crouched in that little alcove trying to look invisible? Later, I dutifully reported the call to Meem. (Once, Late at nite, the phone rang. I heard Meem say hello, then the words, "You're crazy!", before hanging up & returning to bed with her husband...

## Chapter 28: What's A Ring Have to do with It?

85

Was the family rather unique, or was I just bug-eyed being a part of it? I was just a young girl lacking any experience in dealing with the real world beyond that little island. I knew nothing about being married, fitting in with new people, yet always careful to not leave dirty footprints in my wake (i.e. say or do something wrong)

Anyway, I found Aunt Til rather fascinating, mainly because I knew so little about her & how she came to live with the family.

She just “was”, & I didn't dare ask too much (I'd come to notice a lowering of eyes re: certain topics)...

Aunt Til worked in the city for a very generous boss who provided her with theater tickets & those front row seats..

He also gave her access to the wholesale districts in the city... With her pass, she was able to browse through all the high-price garments heading to all the high-price stores (she once remarked that the sellers were never keen on showing just one buyer around).

I recall her coming home once wearing a full length otter fur coat; how we all swooned over its luxurious softness, etc.

Every morning, Til would head out to the train station, wearing her designer outfit, heels & jewelry. Whatever she did in that office in the city, she was well-paid. Yet, her life revolved around that little house in E. R. (East Rockaway) & her small bedroom with the twin beds (the upstairs was once, no doubt, an attic).

And so on weekends, I would often perch on one of those beds & watch Til do her “sorting”... She’d arrange the silky undergarments, refold scarves, sweaters, rehang those expensive dresses and now & then, give the jewelry a good soak in ammonia...

And, of course, she would pluck something out & hand it to me...

A pretty scarf, maybe. I was like a damn dog waiting for my treat...

She wore those one-piece corsets, & one of her discards came in handy when my pregnancy started to show & clothes got tight...

And so, I came to ask myself why the fascination, maybe I was drawn to the familiar: She loved her booze.. would often get sloshed on week-ends...

It all came down on one such morning when it was jewelry cleaning time. As she often did, Til would have me hand over my diamond, so she could soak it. How many times did I remove that ring and watch her swirl it around?

I can't recall if she ever tried it on, or maybe patted it dry with one of her linen hankies... This time, though, as she held the ring, in all its shining glory, she had this to say: "I'm still waiting for Billy to pay me the money he borrowed to buy this ring."

If this was a movie, I'd have day, no demand, she keep the ring as it was rightfully hers... then storm out of the room... "Peace at any price"... I held my tongue, buried the hurt, & never spoke of it to my husband.

## Chapter 29: I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can

88.1

**Commented [LM1]:** Betty labeled two pages "88". I am calling this one 88.1 and will continue with her numbering.

In the beginning, he would pop in & out on week-end leaves. Then one day I walked in from somewhere & was met by Meem's visiting friend, Marian. Looking glum, she told me he had made a "quick call" to say he was heading to board ship & would be gone at least 4 months.

I recall breaking down in tears, more from shock. So this is it? A quick call & he's off to the high seas? So far, I'd spent more of my married life with his family than with him.

When my labor started, Meem & Dad drove me to St. Albans, where our 1<sup>st</sup> child was born. He came on a "birth" leave of sorts, but there were no "awe" moments exchanged between us, or in all the following births... Anger & jealousy though, were never withheld.

I should note that in all the frenzy of that 1<sup>st</sup> birth, Meem elected to ask my mother to come & give a hand. Eventually, things settled down, as I went beyond young bride to young mother...

I'd often be up and about early mornings, chatting back & forth with Dad as he, fully dressed for the day, would have breakfast. Quite frankly, he was a tad boring & I'd wonder how he attained the status that earned him the title "Our Father". Did he know? If not, he sure acted the part.

Meem would fix his soft-boiled egg, pour his coffee and always ask that inevitable question: "What would you like for dinner tonight?" Then (the) back & forth, till some agreement would be reached. There exchanges were so banal, I often wondered when/if actual talk occurred.

Once, he elected to share how he handed out the Xmas bonuses: The gal who came to work wearing fur coats (*an Aunt Til?*) got the smaller bonus, while the gal in the cloth coat got the larger one.

There was one embarrassing moment that just came out of nowhere. Meem walked in the kitchen just wearing a slip. I was stunned, then horrified when Dad in a flash of anger, ordered her to go put some clothes on.

Once, when asked the inevitable question about dinner, he lashed out, tired of it, and told her to cook whatever she wanted... and there I sat like Pollyanna, wondering what the fuss was about.

In time, as I began to assess father & son, I wondered at their ability to withhold themselves from the women in their lives.

## Chapter 30: Lolita In the Midst

91

The word “we defined”. Our or ours / People in General / Used familiarly, especially in talking to children/Used by Queens or mothers.

It was my husband who first enlightened me about that word & his disdain (*sp disdain*) for it. We were chatting about something mundane & he offered up how the use of “we this”, “we that”, etc displeased him. Oh, some quirk, like others, he often expounded upon, that I usually ignored... Beware hidden messages!!!

One morning, Meem announced that we were going shopping to Garden City – my favorite place, that Dad had given her money to buy me a new winter coat. Note: He was always generous to me in that way, no matter where I was. One Easter, when I was in VA, it was a \$25 check for an Easter bonnet... and so on...

A family friend, Kay, worked in the coat department, so it was fun being able to chat & choose our way through the coat racks. Then maybe Meem & I had a pleasant lunch, or shopped some more. As always, I would have been in a pleasant mood as we settled in for the drive home.

Even now it angers me that she let me frolic about like a damn fool, knowing she was about to ambush me in the car. With a well-rehearsed speech, it was all about my being “too familiar” with Dad; how “we” probably should have treated him in the more casual way I did (or words to that affect), but it’s too late for that now, etc., etc., etc.

As I sat there, bewildered, hurt, embarrassed.... too passive - like dear old Dad- to be rightfully angry, I focused on who the “we” referred to was,

Was there a family confab?

Did everyone – including my husband – put their heads together and ponder the Lolita in the Midst? In truth, Meem was the “Royal We”.

I often wondered about the deference given to the one jokingly called, “Our Father” who kept a mistress during the war. One daughter said she’d kick her husband to the curb & scrub floors to feed the kids. But it was Meem’s decision to stay & the others fell in line according to the will of the “Royal we”...

In truth, as I had tried so hard to be well-liked by all, especially my husband’s father, my morning coffee sessions with Dad were too chatty. I guess as my husband would have noted: It’s the lowly fisherman getting too uppity with the esteemed huntsman. (In earlier reference to his calling my side fishermen; his, huntsmen).

## Chapter 31: A Bit of Pillow Talk

(Note at top: "Refer to P 70: In Retrospect. Also p. 72 The Potted Plant)

94

I recall my young husband describing this lovely encounter with a Naval Commander who took a young Petty Officer on a grand tour of New York City. Bear in mind, this was quite after my 1<sup>st</sup> experience there, where he left me stranded in traffic.

True or not, he wanted to show this young man the finer parts of the city, including the Museum of Art. It was there, contemplating perhaps Mona Lisa's smile that he presented his view of how he best serves his career in the Navy, while maintaining a solid married life with wife and children:

Rather than follow him port-to-port, his family awaits his visits in a nice house that he provides – these visits, I assume, at his convenience.

**Commented [LM2]:** Could be "There or not".

## Chapter 32: Daddy Issues / Scattered Memories

95

I can't recall the 1<sup>st</sup> time I cut the "apron strings" and determined to follow him port-to-port. It certainly marked my entry into an entirely new world – The Good, Bad & Ugly. I have no recollection now, in my senior years of exact dates & years. Things happened, so the term "scattered" means just that, but my memories remain clear.

There was a time when the ship went into dry dock. That meant out of the water & fine-tuned like a car, so to speak. It meant unlimited time with spouses, except on duty nights.

Most elected to rent a place near dry dock, but I was pregnant & didn't relish the sights & sounds of belching ships and the smell of thick oily water. The view was just unpleasant.

Instead, we rented a furnished duplex in a quiet locale far from the dry dock. We soon learned the property was owned by an Admiral's widow who drove in from Washington D.C. once a week, without fail to collect the rent.

She was on the plump side, heavily made-up, with clunky rings & things here and there. She asked my husband's "rank" & seemed to like the sound of "Petty Officer". *Note: Many years later when I rented a small apartment near the beach, the landlord's wife, with her high & mighty attitude was an exact replica of that Admiral's widow... clunky jewels & all.*

Anyway, soon after we settled in came a knock on the door, standing there was a young man in a nice shirt who introduced himself as a representative from the Tracy Tug Boat Company. A most familiar name.

Naturally, I was quite impressed that Dad took the trouble to locate us and sent his young man to our door. And so I happily invited him in and called out to my husband.

After shaking hands, the young man told my husband he was there on behalf of his father, who wanted to make sure we were settled in okay & did we need anything. It was as if those words triggered a demon within; my husband exploded in anger, telling that poor young man that he didn't need his daddy's GOD DAMNED HELP; that he was capable of taking care of himself. (I did wonder what sort of report Dad received).

And so it was throughout the marriage; how even little things could trigger the demon.

### More Scattered Memories

I can't recall the when or how, but I was in East Rockaway and my husband deployed elsewhere. Meem, as usual, played Dad's emissary & presented me with an offer:

If I so desired, Dad would like to give me ownership of the vacant house on the property. Well, that sure sent my mind in a whirl. First off, I thought of that Commander who had his wife & kids safely tucked away in their forever home, and how my husband could now do the same, freeing both to spend lovely hours in art galleries, etc. Mainly though, his dream-come-true where "home" would always be a few strides away.

Somehow, I found the right words to refuse his offer, and Meem could banish the thought of "Lolita" a permanent resident (my husband never knew the offer). "Home" refers to his mother's home which he labeled his only true one.

## Chapter 33: Eleanor Again. Back to the Island (and trouble)

99

With my young son being Granny & Grandpa's first great-grandchild, we were more than welcomed to spend the next deployment with them. I don't recall how that sat with my mother or how I managed it, but I'm sure she garnered, via the phone, much sympathy for being cast aside.

Grandpa worked at the golf course as grounds keeper, & my young son & I would often deliver him the lunch granny prepared. He (*her son*) had a 3-wheeler he'd tool around in, a lunch box on the handle bar, announcing her was "going to work" – just like grandpa. The bond those two had was lovely.

As usual, any few days of liberty meant my husband dividing it up between East Rockaway & the Island. Surely, a "grown" man with a wife & new son, would head directly to them & bypass that side visit for once?

Commented [LM3]: Her son

### The Long Island Expressway

Well, of course not, but it would have been better if he'd stayed right there in East Rockaway; fresh from visiting the "huntsmen", he was less than delighted being with the "Fishermen" and he wasted no time informing me that his son spoke in a "God Damned Polish accent".

As I write this now, it's hard to imagine all those intervening years ahead where things would go from bad to worse. Yet, I always held hope that things would get better. So onward & upward.

My father-in-law's health had begun to deteriorate. He had a condition called angina, something affecting the heart. While I was still on the island though, plans would have been made to move to Norfolk, VA. Sometimes I'm in awe at how I managed to keep on the move like a gypsy. It was all about keeping the family intact – if he agreed or not.

Note: My vision is getting weaker & it's often hard to see what I'm writing, so hope it looks better to another reader than it does to me. Unable to read much of anything now, writing for me is therapeutic, but I flinch at misspelled words.

When I last saw Eleanor, she'd had a 2<sup>nd</sup> child & was settled in the little house built for her by her dad's employer. Then she & Chris left the island & moved to the mainland. Sometime after that, I saw her for the last time when she visited her parents in the same apartment above the garage. This time, her family had really grown to - I think - 3 or 4 children – a tight squeeze in that tiny living room. I was struck at Eleanor's demeanor – a bit haughty, like her former self never existed. Well, it sure did on my wedding day. >>>

It's only natural Eleanor would be my matron-of-honor; the only married girlfriend in my circle. Quite frankly, I was anxious for the whole wedding day to end & be on my way to the next chapter.

The wedding party was now gathered at my parent's house, where I got packed & ready for the ferry ride to the mainland. It must have been my new husband who drew my attention to what had been going on way back at the reception... Eleanor had gotten her hooks into the best man, my new brother-in-law, looking pretty good in that Marine uniform.

Protocol, I imagine, required that the Best Man & Matron of Honor would practice their assigned roles & Eleanor probably got a head start in the "getting to know you" phase.

Anyway, I looked out the kitchen window & there was Eleanor & Hap giddily decorating our car.

And there stood Babs, also taking in the view from another window. My new husband was furious; “My sister’s a beautiful woman. What’s he see in her, etc”.

Such an outburst was absent, though, on our way to the ferry when my car seat felt loose. Upon lifting it, there was my honeymoon apparel shoved inside, wrinkled & dirty. It had been a long day, and now this, so I burst into tears. Did he comfort me; express the same fury he did on his sister’s behalf? Hell no! Just stood there, that twitch in his face that became all too familiar over the years. With holding words best left unspoken.

A year or so later, the cab driver cleaned the car. Lifting the back seat, he found Hap’s camera. I had no idea such pictures existed. The camera was returned & that’s how I finally saw my wedding day when the film was finally developed.

## Chapter 34: A Death in the Family

104

I was back on the island, staying at Granny's, when the call came: my father-in-law had died. His health had declined & he was bedridden. I'd kept in touch through letters & was told that when my latest one arrived, he'd gotten up to hear it read in the living room. He collapsed there on the rug & never revived.

It happened while my then husband was making the usual side trip to East Rockaway before heading for the island. When he walked in, the funeral directors were there, and his mother & others behind the closed bedroom door. Hap, too, was there, having been called, but unable to restore a pulse. This was before the advent of ambulance services, etc. Today, he'd probably would have survived & lived was beyond his 53-54 years like his son!!

Back on the island, it was decided that I should leave as soon as possible. (*Note: looking back, it's strange the level of esteem my family held for that family*). So, Uncle Ted arranged for Ed Hedge, the one-armed fisherman, to take me to the mainland to catch a train. So, there I was in the black of night, in a small fishing boat, slicing through the choppy sea, its dim light guiding the way & nary a word exchanged between us.

I barely recall being helped onto the dock, making my way across the expanse of railroad tracks & entering the New London train station. Then, from one station in New York to another to catch the ever-stopping Long Island train, hoping not to miss the East Rockaway one. Scariest of all – the deserted stations, save for the leery eyes of unkempt men. Yet the timid little clam digger managed her unheralded arrival in one piece (He was, and remained, Preoccupied).

## Chapter 35: Bits and Pieces

106

Meem on the phone with the priest arranging a funeral mass. “Sorry, your husband is not listed as a regular member”. Meem in a huff: “Well, check your list of financial contributors!” Priest, sputtering an apology. And so, a high mass with all the trimmings (Hap & Giovi even contributed something or other for the Altar) was arranged.

There was a wake. I recall Bernice, through the open door, collapsing on the John; Giovi in attendance. Meem not liking the fit of Bernice’s black dress, so it was given to me to wear. At the cemetery entrance, the military guard unable to locate Dad’s burial papers. Babs, in typical dry humor: “What are we supposed to do, hang Dad on a hook?”

Looking back at the funeral and large reception did offer my mother-in-law a well-deserved spotlight even though it was to hear praises heaped upon her late husband. Praises I was to hear years later re: those who served under my husband.

She almost swooned when one gentleman kissed her hand – all to honor the widow of the many they proudly served under in the Army. And to further show how far removed we Clemente women were from our husband’s “realness”, Meem learned that Dad was wounded leading his men onto some beachhead.

NOTE: An avid reader, I was struck by Hemmingway’s portrayal of women: He never elevated them beyond their usefulness in offering comfort when needed. I later read that his writings reflected his misogynist view of women.

## Chapter 36: In Death Do We Bicker

108

I did what I could to be of help in the funerals aftermath; mainly divorcing myself from the unsettling, bitter conflicts between mother and son. All to do with distribution of Dad's belongings. He fought tooth and nail over every item she (so calmly) put aside – including Dad's high-end Brooks Brother's business suits. I marveled that she held her ground; gave a sigh of relief when Giovi was granted the Glassed-in gun cabinet. (My husband's preoccupation with guns had become worrisome). In the end, he got the Jeep – Dad's weekend tow used to tool around in. Also, the tape recorder – one of the 1<sup>st</sup> on the market, and whatever other items he had mini-tantrums over. Yes, his childish displays had a profound effect on me. I was still maturing myself, but I knew it was now best to expect less of him, rather than more.

POST SCRIPT:

We were driving somewhere. He'd spread the letter page across the steering wheel. It had come from the stash retrieved from Dad's work shop.

Previously, Aunt Til had been clearing out papers & such from the workshop and feeding all to the fire built in the barbeque Dad had built. That is, until an explosion of sorts erupted from the pit. Turns out Til was unknowingly tossing live bullets into the flames.

Amont those papers were letters from the mistress – the one he was now reading made catty reference to the outfits worn by Meem and others at the tugboat christening – Their tacky taste in clothes. Actually, I was living in the East Rockaway home when preparations were being made for Meem to christen the tugboat in her name; "The Barbara".

I recall Dad later remarking how splendid – or whatever - everyone looked, also recall seeing pictures of the event. What struck me was how recent the letters were; not only the Friday night calls, but proof she was corresponding via letters.

My mind envisioned Dad in his workshop, assured of privacy, relishing each and every word in the letters probably sent from his New York office. Did Meem know (?) – Suspect? I think back to her often-recited mantra, “Peace at any price”. Whenever she conveyed those words to me, it was in response to things troubling me about her son.

In the end, “God the Father” (joking reference) left no will, no life insurance. Just exploding bullets and love letters. For me, the price wasn’t worth it. In the end, I couldn’t even claim the words Meem was at least able to claim of her husband. “He was generous.” (While he lived).

## Chapter 37: VITAL STATISTICS

111

William J. Clemente

Elizabeth Ann Paquette

Married on Dec. 3, 1949

Reverend James Fitzgerald

June 11, 1969

Official Separation Papers and Restraining order

May 17, 1985: Received Service ID Card (Tri-Care)

July 3, 1974: Final divorce decree

From separation to divorce: 20 years

From Marriage to Divorce: 25 years

From 1969-1985 (16 years)

July 1, 1973 – Ex husbands retirement

Sept 13, 2006: Letter terminating my portion of Ex's retirement due to his demise.

Amount of alimony lost: 1558.41

## Chapter 38: In God We Trust – Not Husbands

112

The last notation of alimony is significant, as it's a small percentage of his monthly pay. The most monthly stipend I ever had to live on was \$800, and that for a short amount of time before he stopped support all together.

In truth, other than the start (*beginning*) of our marriage when the allotment was mandatory, I never knew his monthly income. As an officer, his income was between him and the paymaster and not even privy to an attorney seeking \$ support for his client - me.

I once went to the naval attorney (Uniformed) seeking clarification of my then husbands explanation of why he could no longer send me an allotment; plus other excuses re: adequate support. The young lawyer laughed and couldn't believe how naive I was in "falling" for such a pack of lies.

## Chapter 39: Stupidity Deserves No Praise

113

Early on in the marriage, I'd begun to wonder the meaning of it all – My place in the scheme of things. As a young wife and mother, I wanted to be noticed beyond that. And so, in the quiet of an evening, I turned and asked a simple, but meaningful question; “Am I pretty?”

I suppose I expected some off-hand reply, nothing poetic – just suitable. Instead, he sat back, pondering long and hard. My God, I thought, the exquisite joy holding me in suspense!!!

“Yes”, he finally replied, “In the kitchen, wearing an apron”.

So In the scheme of things, he was, in silky fashion, asserting his control. I say this now , in retrospect, because it took many years to realize that my stupidity outranked my loyalty. (See Page 73)

Commented [LM4]: Page 78

## Chapter 40: The Boys

114

When I joined the family, I immediately took note that the brothers-in-law, Hap and Giovi were referred to as “The Boys”, mainly by Meem and Aunt Til. When Dad passed away, they became the go-to guys to help Meem in the quagmire he left behind. Before that, with my husband – the son – mostly away, they’d also formed a bond with his dad. It was “Dad” in fact, who paid an integral part in getting “The Boys” on a business career path after the war. (As mentioned, my ex turned down that path).

In truth, they became surrogate uncles to me, sort of replacing the ones I grew up with. Having once been outsiders themselves, I think they sensed my struggle to fit in.

With the women, though, I tended to walk on eggs; always sensing there were rules to follow, but not knowing them.

114.1

**Commented [LM5]:** Page 114 was duplicated. This page is now numbered 114.1

Whenever there was a long stint in port, I always broached the same request – To attend a course or two at the Community College (I’d never given up on the idea). He’d just have to watch the kids a couple of hours. Bu the answer was always a definite NO. And the why: “I don’t want to be married to someone smarter than me.”

One of the wives was a volunteer at the small community theatre; working backstage, painting props, etc, and she invited me to come along. “No way”, he said. I don’t want you hanging around with those theater types. And on and on.

It’s difficult to recall that intensity of feeling I once felt for him, or if it was even love. Even today, I’m unable to define the meaning of love and marriage. However, the groundwork for the eventual dissolution was laid back east.

Early on when we were staying at Meem's a tiny antique lamp at the foot of the stairs blew out. My husband asked if she wanted him to replace it, and here was her answer: "No, let the boys do it". And Aunt Til would often lament the fact that "It's a shame Billy didn't inherit his dad's skills". And of course, there was all that praise for "Hap's carpentry skill", etc. etc, etc.

In truth, it angered me. "Hey, this is my husband you're degrading", was my initial reaction. In time, though, I became the sounding board for his emotional outbursts re: "The Boys". Yet, it didn't bother him in the least when they bore his financial responsibilities for the kids and I, when he chose to pocket the money for himself. It took root in East Rockaway, but it took so long for me to realize the depth of his need to have money to flash around.

## Chapter 41: I Was Never Promised a Rose Garden

116

Back on page 36, I spoke of the dark episodes, mainly to get it over with. However, it had to be related as it was an ongoing situation throughout the marriage. Maybe my mother should be commended for training me in the role of Enabler – something I learned I'd become through Al-Anon.

Commented [LM6]: Page 41

I can't recall if I'd already spoke of my ongoing request to spend shore duty someplace different – A change of scenery for all of us and at government expense. But it was always back to that love/hate place – East Rockaway.

I was pregnant, he was stationed in Brooklyn and (gasp!) commuting. I can't recall why we were – yet again – living with his mother. So much of that time is blocked from memory, it's like trying to fit the pieces of a picture puzzle. In truth, I was heading for a meltdown.

It was just husband, Aunt Til and I – the reset vacationed in VT. Each morning Til and nephew would head for the train, and later on, Til would call from the city to plan the evening dinner. How I got roped into such a situation – cook and scullery maid – is beyond me - and where were my kids??

Things weren't good between he and I. There was a definite hostility. Then Giovi started showing up for dinner, lamenting Bernice's absence; how she would not budge from VT despite his pleas to come home (in actions, it sometimes seemed as if sister and brother were sprung from the same egg).

It must have been a duty night, with just Til, Giovi and I. Til nodding off after too many cocktails. Out of the blue, Giovi asked if I would please take a walk with him on the beach.

Son of a Bitch!!! Lolita was back. I politely declined. He had once confided how he tried to convince Bernice to move to New Jersey – away from her mother.

In solidarity, I could so easily have confided the same regarding my husband. (Many years later, one of my boys reported seeing Bernice slap Giovi in the face).

Anyway, things turned upside down when my husband came home one evening and announced he had applied for two weeks leave. Naturally, I assumed it would cover the upcoming birth of our child. Then he produced the papers stating that said leave started the coming Monday. It was the ultimate revenge for saddling him with another child. Yet, it came as no surprise.

Of the seven births, this one comes to mind: I'm in labor and it's Hap and a young husband, who's a volunteer something, who arrive to take me to the hospital. As I step into the car, I'm horrified when my water breaks. I'm handed a towel I must shove up between my legs. Then we're off. The blue lite, stuck atop the roof by the guy, blasting away.

And all this going on while husband, new-father-to-be, is probably enjoying a coffee break in Brooklyn. In truth, he never so much as witnessed my waters break in those seven births. After all, if those (“marvelous”) Asians can squat down in the rice paddy, push out a baby, secure it to the body and continue working, what’s the big deal.

I was able to hire a young girl I befriended to come in and give me a hand. It was almost fun for her as she loved babies and the tasks involved. All went well until the morning Aunt Til took command. She was headed for work, and actually had a list of chores she expected the poor girl to perform. She was treating her like hired help at my expense. At first, a compromise: I’ll fold the diapers, you make Til’s bed, etc. (“Peace at any price”). But Til’s rudeness was too much; and despite my pleas, she, the girl, quit. By now things were getting too much.

120

for me too.

By the time Meem & all returned from Vt., I was making an appointment with Dr. Giadono. I can't recall how I found him, but he was a cheerful Italian sort whose office was downstairs. Once, the kids got loose and were running around the waiting room covered with measles.

I'd been seeing the "Family" doctor, but really wanted someone unconnected to them. He was a shoulder to cry on, etc., etc. In expressing my need to get out from under my family, I, as usual, left out the elephant in the room – my husband. He mused that maybe "Meem" was too mothering, or whatever.

Instead, maybe what we - yours truly, my husband and kids join he, his wife and kids for a rousing weekend at their favorite Episcopal family campground in the mountains. Dream on Dr G.!!! I must say though, that my husband was a bit taken aback that I "earned" a doctor's friendship. Was that control issue rearing its head? Sure,

then I saw a shrink, who creeped me out, so was sent to the mountains to stay with Meem's friend, Marion. Today, such, as what I experienced is called post-partum meltdown.

While away, the mice did play. Meem had occasion to contact my Dr. Giardaro regarding the baby's temperature. She requested a house call. He replied he didn't make hose calls. "Well, said she, "I don't make office calls." Maybe Dr G. liked her feistiness, but they somehow connected. And somehow, through Meem, "Aunt Vera", the divorced, rather outrageous family friend liked what Meem had to say about him.

So, when I returned from Vt., the flirtatious "Aunt Vera" was now Dr. G's new patient. Would all the poker girls follow? Of course, when I next saw Dr. G. he was full of questions regarding this outlandish new patient. No way. Sadly, I was back to square one in looking for a shoulder to cry on. Someone unconnected to the family.

And, "where were my kids?"

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It was time to fetch them from the island, they must have been in Granny and Aunt Mel's care. It can't believe what a gypsy life I led. Anyway, I'd look forward to the trip – a chance to get away – Just us. It turns out plans had already been made. I was informed that Bernice had asked if she could make the trip with him. She had a dear friend in CT that she'd love to visit. Besides, there'd be more room in car without the baby and all. And her brother was all too agreeable.

OK. Here's the scenario: I lose it completely. Ask where the hell they got off taking over my anticipated trip to finally see my children, etc., that I deserved that trip after being stuck in this never-ending sameness, etc., etc. There's a saying: Choose your battles. This wasn't one of them. It was close, though, when Bernice came in with a pot of something, and explicit instructions in how to prepare it for Giovi's dinner, as they'd be on the road. (If she only knew!!) *Note:*

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**Commented [LM7]:** Page 126

## Chapter 42: A Pause to Reflect

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On his deathbed, years after our divorce, and into his second marriage, my ex-husband was said to utter these words: “I was a rotten husband! It was all about me and money.” Even in death, he didn’t shy from the truth.

Those words come to mind as I sometime struggle to be precise in the matter of dates, locations, etc. What really matters, is the truth in the telling. All those years trying to understand what drove him to acts so incomprehensible – acts that often affected my mental stability. And why did I choose him over the nice guys? Maybe it was the Fonzi effect. Looking back, there was the dark side, and the charismatic one. The latter eventually reserved for “those others”. That charismatic aura that inspired enthusiasm in those young men under him – other people’s sons.

## Chapter 43: When it Truly Became All About Him

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We were in Virginia when my husband was given the opportunity as an enlisted man to join the rank of Commissioned Officer. Earlier, he had spoken of applying for something called “Chief Warrant Officer”. I was struck by the fact the interview not only referred to the fact that said Warrant Officers were considered neither “fish or foul” (or something such) in terms of recognition, but it was important that one’s wife would go along with it. No doubt, he readily gave assurance in that regard, but was none too pleased my input came into play. No doubt, as he began the process of becoming that fabled “Officer and Gentleman”, he would have preferred going it alone, without a wife and kids trailing behind. It was a new beginning for him. But also the beginning of the end for us.

After a crash course in becoming what he humorously called “the oldest Ensign in the Navy” (Note: As I struggle, in writing all of this, to recapture the long-ago feelings that drew me to him, one would have been his endearing humor), then came the nitty-gritty of “dressing the part”.

The streets of Norfolk were lined with all things pertaining to Navy, including Naval tailoring. And so he was outfitted head-to-toe in all the adornments of a newly hatched Naval Officer.

And so came the pivotal event – the day he arrived home splendidly attired head-to-toe in the crisp new uniform of a Naval Officer, and before I could utter a word, came a prepared speech disallowing me any participation in his achievement. It harked back to that dreaded “we”. That “this” was his alone. That I had no part in it; was no “fucking helpmate!” (*The crude phrase is mine*). “Yes, SIR!”

At least he was able to smile when the kids, seeing him in his summer whites, referred to him as the “Popsicle Man” – the white-coated guy driving the Good Humor truck.

Anyway, my bruised feelings were put on hold as he prepared to deploy for parts unknown. It seemed no sooner did the ship depart, that an envelope arrived addressed to me; return address a tailoring shop downtown. Inside, an itemized list of charges covering his complete Officers wardrobe, down to the socks. He saved the best for last: Sticking me with the bill. An Officer and A Gentleman – Ha Ha.

In fact, his new status only drove his obsession with money to new heights. It’s hard to love someone who lacks that capacity, and so I chose commitment over love. Rather than anger, his actions caused puzzlement and deep hurt. What an idiot to allow myself such emotions.

## Chapter 44: The Home Sweet Home That Wasn't

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After my “meltdown”, I knew of one thing: I wanted to be in a place of my own, with my own little family – away from the intrusive others. We looked for apartments, but then the idea of buying a house somehow took hold. It's one thing to put down a deposit on an apartment, but another, a down payment on a house, for sure.

No matter, we started looking at houses and found the one on Yarmouth Road (of all the places we lived, that name stands out). Regarding the down payment, his mother lent us the money (*good luck there!*).

Was I happy to still be stuck in East Rockaway? No. The location was not close to stores, etc. – A trivial matter it seems. As for furniture, I can't recall all that. What does come to mind is my mother-in-law's parting words as I embarked on this new venture: “Stay away from the Jews on that street!!”

Much of my life on Yarmouth, of course, was spent alone – that is, without him. But I remained entwined with his family. For the most part, it was pure hell.

On the positive side, I connected with all the neighbors – Jew and Gentile. I regret having to enroll the two oldest children in parochial school but, given that all the tribal Clemente children were attendees, I lacked the courage to be a maverick.

*Note: Thankfully, they flunked out. In both instances, my Jewish neighbor drove me to the school for my unpleasant encounter with Mother Superior.*

Note: My oldest son, to this day, still fears nuns. But my fear resides in the haunting memories of a 6-year old: It was in Taftville, CT where my parents enlisted a stranger (female neighbor) to bring me to this place filled with children and the frightening presence of strangely clad creatures I'd never seen before.

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But were soon identified as nuns. I had no preparation for what turned out to be a Sunday School class of sorts for children not enrolled in the Parochial School.

The two nuns in charge must have been recruited to scare the hell out of these non-attendeers. Ghostly stories about death (the little girl with the tear on her cheek; found dead in the AM with the tear still wet (What the hell did that mean?!))

Then the pennies we were obligated to bring to fill the can labeled Pagan Babies (what's a pagan baby? I dared not ask). There were four Italian (so labeled) boys in the class, who (I kid you not) all drowned while fishing. So we young tots were led into this room filled with the over-powering scent of flowers and something else. Then made to stop and gaze into the dead faces of each boy in each casket. And to think my father told horror stories of being beaten with a rubber hose by nuns,

And my mother threatening to “send me to the nuns” if I misbehaved. Then, without warning, delivering me unto them (Note: Just had to get that scary tale out of my system).

Elaine, a neighbor and friend, drove my kids and hers to parochial school. When my daughter was booted out, I was happy to pass on her uniform to Elaine’s daughter. Then Bernice came by (*she was always popping in like an annoying fly!!*) claiming as her due, that same uniform for her daughter. When told it was given to Elaine’s daughter, one could almost hear a clap of thunder within her body. “Charity toward family comes first”, she intoned in a fit of anger. Here I was, a grown woman, married-with children and she was – again! – talking down to me like some errant child. She seemed to think she had a license to run my life. I sometimes wonder about Meem’s “Peace at any price” credo.

Did it help spawn these brother/sister bad asses?

On one of those “pop ins”, she actually provided a bit of support: I’d just finished preparing dinner, when, sober-faced, “He” walked in. I’d barely had time for the words pot roast, when he brushed past, and with a curt “I already ate”, headed for the bedroom, closing the door. Well, Bernice went ballistic. “How dare you!”, she ranted, “Walking away from a nice prepared meal.” She was beside herself. I just shrugged my shoulders. I could have said, “Welcome to my world”, but why bother. They’re two peas in a pod.

Humorous note: My time on Yarmouth would have been miserably lonely if not for the friendships I cultivated. Married women especially, never perceived me as a threat. (That came when I was legally separated). What they couldn’t perceive was my ability to live months on end without a husband around. Unthinkable to them.

## Chapter 45: Hot Dogs and Beans, Oh, My!

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Bernice, my ongoing nemesis, held forth one time, on how she and Giovi ate hot dogs and beans one night a week to cut the cost of food. She was rather smug about such a sacrifice, given Giovi's rich appetite.

I almost laughed given that hot dogs and beans was a regular entrée in my household when Dad wasn't around. This due to a never-ending shortage of money.

I'm not sure what inspired me to serve such a meal when my husband was present. Maybe to show him what was what when he was away. After all, he turned up his nose at the pot roast (Maybe that was my inspiration). There he sat, not saying a word, watching the kids dig in. Then he spooned beans into his plate, and, in one swift motion, tossed it against the wall. "Never again will hot dogs and beans be served at my dinner table", he roared. Then, of course, a dramatic exit. What's to say, the (pathetic) scene speaks for itself.

There was yet another hot dogs and beans episode; this involving said nemesis, Bernice. The kids were quietly eating dinner, and in she pops – all gussied up for some social engagement. Then, seeing what was being served, she went into a red-faced tirade. “How dare I”, she bellowed, “serve my children meat on Good Friday!” Then, storming out, she headed for that social engagement: Dinner at the local, expensive (I’d eaten there; once with Meem and Mrs. Bush) seafood restaurant. I could picture her cracking crab and fuming at my apparent heresy.

She fancied herself, I suppose, as an ardent (often nasty!) defender of the faith. Yet, that high and mighty attitude took an abrupt turn when she became a widow years later: I once received a card from her in which she expressed remorse for not recognizing how lonely my life must have been managing on my own – how “difficult”. (*too little, too late*).

Moving onward, she then shared her home and other comforts with a retired doctor (*From saint to sinner*).

## Chapter 46: Back to Home Sweet Home, etc.

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The house on Yarmouth was, I believe, a Cape Cod. The rooms downstairs composed of the living room, kitchen and master bedroom were all on the small side. Then two attic bedrooms. The back yard, however, brought me back to those peninsular days: It was rather large and composed entirely of sand! Anyway, my intention was to make everything “ship shape” before my husband’s next deployment – to ensure he couldn’t squander the money in front of his family.

Some charges I couldn’t control, such as Giovi coming one day (*looking sheepish*) with measuring tape, explaining that Meem was buying curtains for the living room. Nice gesture, except they were white and sheer or badly (sp) in need of frequent washing, starching and ironing (*mustn’t waste idle time!*)

I gave birth again on Yarmouth Road and can’t, in all honesty, recall but the ride home from (the) hospital.

I was sitting in the car (or was it a truck?), holding our newborn when a swirl of dust-like stuff engulfed us. I looked down, and the baby's face and blanket were covered with it.

Turns out, while I was in the hospital, he was "retained" to do yard work by a family member, which required delivering bags of (??) fertilizer – the residue now showering down on my newborn. Also, in my absence, the ugly wallpaper in our bedroom was covered over in a pattern of blazing red roses.

Well, I had no say in the curtains or wallpaper, but I did assert myself regarding the storage shed: I had no idea how it would come about, but the kids needed a place to store the wagons, trikes, etc. They'll be trailing through the sand – and not indoors. I was also adamant that – said shed be painted red. And to my amazement; said request was granted.

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Note: Often wondered how long that red shed remained... A memory of me for the neighbors.

I purposely stayed away from the backyard as construction began, mainly because my husband would be working side by side with “The Boys”, Hap and Giovi.

Note: From the start, I sensed his anger and simmering at my audacity and knew, as it eventually turned out, I would pay dearly for it.

Anyway, lumber was delivered, and work began, but of course, that old resentment reared its head.

It was Babs this time, not Bernice, who came to voice a complaint. I had to speak to brother Bill, as he was giving Hap and Giovi a hard time, refusing to follow the guidelines, etc. Bear in mind, that Hap, a self-taught carpenter, had built a dining room addition to their home, a state-of-art theater in the basement, etc. and my husband had no such talent. “He’s your brother. Tell him off!” He never listens to any of us,” said she. “Well, he never listens to me, either!!” What amazed me is the notion that anyone thought I had influence over him – yet it was often assumed over the years.

## Chapter 47: Back to Home Sweet Home... etc. (Daddy's Overnite)

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Meem would often stop by and take one of the kids home for an overnigher. The others, of course, would carry on, till their turn. Anyway, it was a treat for the chosen to be fussed over, et cetera. Especially if such attention was craved by a grown-up.

We'd all gather at Meem's for dinner, Bernice included. As time passed, I noticed brother and sister were getting a bit tipsy, and I dreaded the thought of another gun to the head routine. Note: As I so matter-of-factly say that it's because time has erased the emotional fallout of all that transpired through the years.

So, I said it was getting late and time to take the kids home. Then, as an afterthought, I jokingly (or not) suggested that if Dad wanted to spend the night at Meem's, he could take us home, grab his toothbrush, and come back. Damned if he didn't respond with joyful glee. He took us home, grabbed, whatever, and raced back to mom's. With nary a word. And so it was.

## Chapter 48: It's Deployment Time, and Shit Hits the Fan (Bounced Checks)

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No matter what, I always cried when he left - there were those precious few times in the midst of turmoil and the dread of being completely on my own. And now the only military wife planted in the neighborhood of families headed. 9 to 5 dads.

I can't recall how long he'd been gone before it was time to pay the bills: the mortgage, utility bills, etc., or how long before the notices of insufficient funds began arriving. How could that be? I'd hardly spent any of the allotment deposits. Yet it was depleted.

In a panic, I, of course, had to reach out to the family. Even now, it's all blur, but for the encounter with my nemesis, Bernice. She showed up in a fury, threw a wad of money on the table claimed no matter how little Giovi made, she had figured out how to manage it.

Postscript: The bank statement revealed a number of checks out of sequence, stolen by him, and cashed at the Officers Club Pronto, each for \$100 amounts each.

## Chapter 49: It's Always Something

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Most in the service are aware that life for the spouse isn't easy; especially those with children. She has her responsibilities; he has his. One of which is to ensure that she has adequate funds to carry on in his absence. Actually, shared responsibilities is the basis of most marriages.

Living with the civilians on Yarmouth Road showed me how far from average my marriage really was. Short of a death in the family, military wife can't expect a spouse to come to the rescue in most difficult situations. Over the years, though, he came to use the "duty" excuse. As to not deal with any unpleasant situation.

Looking at his service record - all those medals and citations amassed over the years, those acts of bravery toward others, mostly strangers. Yet, the cowardness he often showed in facing a family crisis. Only a shrink could figure that out.

Owning a home means you can't call the landlord when things break down, because the landlord is you. And so, it was when the sewer overflowed. I learned there's a certain protocol involved when requesting assistance: the company removes such overflow by the bucket, and, depending (on) how much money you can afford you agree on a certain number of buckets.

The sewer trucks arrival means a gathering of neighborhood kids anxious to peer down that deep hole unearthed, revealing its smelly contents. Then, the allotted buckets filled, the hole is covered; the earth, neatly padded down.

Note: I contracted this operation on my own, without need of family assist. That all changed, though, when the next overflow seeped into the basement where I did wash and hang clothes to dry in bad weather. The walls were oozing: The smell awful. And so the family paid to hook me up to the city's sewer line. My husband again, off the hook for the bill. (*Bernice no doubt fuming*)

My Jewish neighbor happened to visit while I was tending to the baby who was running a fever and out of sorts, Soon after she left, the phone rang, It was that neighbor informing me that her pediatrician was on his way to examine the baby - free of charge. Soon after came a knock and there stood a smiling, pleasant looking young man. Doctor So and so. He gently undressed, the baby, performed a thorough exam and administered the necessary meds to lower the fever, et cetera. Then told me to come to his office the next day - no appointment necessary - for a follow up exam, I was told by the generous spirit of both neighbor and doctor.

The next day, when I entered the waiting room, it was filled by a sea of white-uniformed nannies with their charges. There was an area in East Rockaway with newly built sprawling ranch houses. The newest design in one-story living and occupied by upper class Jews. A burr in the heels of Catholics. Even my neighbor laughed at the scene - my encounter with "Ranch House Jewish Royalty". Such a sweet doctor though.

After a few months, absent, came word that my husband was getting a long weekend pass. Naturally, I got things in “ship-shape” order; the fridge stocked with food, and – yes! - beer. Apparently, he had also called his mom - which led to a follow-up call to me: He will be spending the bulk of that short visit painting his mom's kitchen.

In my mind, I imagine him saying, “Sorry, I'd like to spend those few days with my wife and kids”. No such luck.

Yes, I know it's all about payback. Every time the family helps me in emergencies, he must perform services beneficial to them, leaving me out in the cold. Well, I had a full-blown tirade –Bernice style. “He stays with us, PERIOD!!”

As always, though, there's a price to pay: With the help of neighbors and my own new found methods, I had a system to use what's available in home deliveries: there's the poultry guy who delivers plump kosher chickens door-to-to; the young man with the speech impediment, who

delivers my phone-in orders from the butcher shop (a nice steak on the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month as a treat) who loves to chat, and then the milkman: he's a fixture in the neighborhood, who'll even deposit your milk in the fridge for you. I'd just gotten back in his good graces since his check was among those that got bounced.

Anyway, my husband and I were in another room, when the milkman sang out a hello as he opened the fridge to deposit the milk. Needless to say, the presence of another's testosterone under his roof sent him into a rage. That poor man must have thought his life was about to end, to be honest.

Whenever he exhibited what amounts to such childish behavior, something inside me died a little. I guess one could say it kept dying over the years until there was nothing left. His military career was the stage on which he performed, but he couldn't sustain the act off-stage - in the role of husband and father.

## Chapter 50: Before Yarmouth, there was Norfolk, VA

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My first visit to Norfolk, VA coincided with meeting Manny and Jean for the first time. They being my husband's aunt and uncle.

It was so long ago, but I have a vague recollection of flying during a snowstorm. And Manny meeting me at the airport. Meem always said that Manny was the only Clemente brother with a sense of humor.

He was most dignified looking, but with a droll humor. The straight-faced kid that took a beat or two before you caught on. As for Manny's wife, Jean, my mother-in-law and Manny's dotting sisters did share the opinion that Manny was just too good for her. I rather liked Jean and her no-nonsense attitude. She was a career type, who I think worked in the military war college library. (*I'm not quite sure*)

She was an excellent seamstress and made all her tailored work suits, etcetera. I believe she came from Hawaii but refused to discuss anything relating to her family background. That Manny doted on her was quite obvious, and something Jean fully accepted as her due.

Once I'd passed the open bathroom door, and there was Manny gently washing Jean's, delicate undies in the sink. Their son, Joe, was then in the Marines, and might have been stationed close by. It was so long ago, but I know my husband showed up. As did Joe - and we comprised 5 under one roof.

During our stay, Manny and Jean had hosted a party for Joe and a bunch of his fellow Marines. Jean was in her element, playing hostess to the young men; getting tipsy. Meem would have smiled knowingly, her assessment of Jean as "Party Girl" in full view.

I wish I'd known more of my mother-in-law's past beyond her quitting school in 4th grade and selling newspapers to fill the motherless family coffer. That she met and married Dad, an “up and comer” (ambitious) world have been a stroke of luck. Yet, how she strove to win her mother-in-law 's approval. “All I wanted”, Meem told me, “was to become a lady”.

As Manny (tucked far away down South) would jokingly say, “It's an honor to be a Clemente”! I did sense that Meem was grooming me as she was groomed. And the name Clemente was pure “Castilian Spanish”, a belief the Clemente sisters probably adhered to as well.

My son recently remarked that he found the Clemente clan a strange lot. Was it so that I was “dancing as fast as I can” to keep up with a false image of blue bloods? All that remains is a rotting farmhouse and some rundown cabins in Vermont.

My second trip to Norfolk was shorter and this time I had Ruth Gil along for company. It was rather strange how the four of us got along - Bill Gil being my ex-boyfriend, now married to my friend from the cove - and a good ten years older than Gil.

Later, when we were all together in Norfolk, Bill Gil and Ruthie came and stayed with me after I gave birth to Kevin. And Gil, a Catholic convert, was Kevin's godfather. Later Ruthie and Gil had a son of their own. But as happens in the military, transfers came about and we did lose touch.

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However, that certainly didn't warn my husband's freakish response when, years later, Gil visited us in East Rockaway: as I reached out to give my old friend a hug, I was rudely jerked away by my husband - and this as his family looked on. He acted no better than a snotty kid having a snit in the sandbox.

That I endured such outbursts over the years was not even due to his misguided jealousy; it was more a cruel display of ownership.

Anyway, back to that second trip: as Ruthie said about checking rooms for rent. I called Aunt Jean and gaily announced that I was back in town, fully expecting an invitation to “come on over”! Instead, Jean stated in a firm tone that it was now time for me to make my own accommodations. I was crushed, of course. But actually, respected her honesty. It taught me a lesson on how not to impose on others.

## Chapter 51: Back To Mommie Dearest

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I won't say I was banished from East Rockaway, but rather I banished myself. In fact, after the "Lolita" episode, Meem carried on as usual – except for that warning look if I laughed too hard or was a bit too chatty around Dad.

And, what, - oh, my God!, if she decided to tattle to my husband? Is this how she fulfilled that adage "Peace at any price"? I suppose, in a way, she did! I was disrupting her peace, and paid the price.

What's sad is that she would think that I, a young mother, married to her son would put the make on that old man. As I described it, he enjoyed chatting with me – a blessing, really, as I strove so hard to fit into that family. Years later, I even had grudging sympathy for that Vietnamese bride swept into that maelstrom, her new husband resuming the battle to usurp the boys.

Anyway, my discomfort was such that I decided to return to the island and deal with my mother – who would be even more formidable as a grandmother.

At first, I moved in with Granny, both she and grandpa thrilled to have their first great-grandchild with them. It was also how I was able to make those short trips to Norfolk, my son under the protection of aunts and uncles. Otherwise, other than my husband visiting the one time he expressed the (unwarranted) declaration that his son had a Polish accent, we'd spent little time together.

But when again pregnant, I decided it was time for a place of my own. I found an upstairs one, close to the grocery store, and a small beach overlooking the cove. The place had once been a summer home that the landlord bought and converted into two apartments; adding a rather steep staircase to the second, smaller one.

The apartment was small but nice and tidy. In the winter, though, I relied on a kerosene stove in the larger bedroom for heat. It meant a trip up and down the staircase to refill the kerosene bottle. Those without furnaces had large black cast iron stoves in the kitchen, some using both kerosene and coal - the kitchen offering the main source of warmth in the winter. My nearly blind aunt used such a one while living in one of the duplexes in the Cove. For a time, I too lived there, but can't recall why.

The landlord had also dug a pit for garbage disposal. There was a garbage dump on the island, but it was a chore to make garbage runs.

*(Sad to say for those like my grandmother, living close to the water, it was common to haul bags of loose stuff for the seagulls to devour. Low tide, though revealed unsightly throwaways like bikes, et cetera.)*

Ecology was not mainstream yet, so the ocean was a dumping ground. We would dig in the oozy black flats for long neck clams, till there were none left for breeding. Same for the oysters Granny collected from the rock beds she accessed by rowboat across the way, etcetera.

Anyway, along with the kerosene bottles, in the winter, I'd haul my bags of garbage down these steep stairs to the garbage pit, causing the rats to scurry. (*I often freaked when they had climbed the stairs*).

Note: Once, years later, a visitation to the island reported seeing the release of body waste from the ferry. And the captain - a long time veteran on the job - was fired. There was an uproar from both residents and summer people. The latter's most vocal regarding their support for the captain. They appreciated and (sp??) all who made their summers pleasant, especially the fisherman's supply of (illegal) short lobsters.

Well, enough of that. Back to Mommy Dearest. Maybe I actually thought I'd have the upper hand here. She'd be thrilled to have access to other grandson and behave accordingly. I wasn't thrilled he'd be bouncing along in that pickup – the Paquette mode of transportation and handy for storing and delivering items big and small to the summer people my mother served. (*Handy too, for the 6-packs of beer always within reach hidden in the clutter*).

It was simple enough to have him back in time for lunch, naps, etc. I'd watch her pull up, my son in her lap, his hands on the steering wheel. I knew how thrilled she was to show him off to the upper crust summer crowd she served. My young son was probably oohed and awed by some of the richest names in the United States.

If she took him in the afternoon, I was ever more watchful and for good reason:

I recall a catchy song back then called “High Hopes” – the words meant to convey, in my mind, a glimmer of light ahead, just you wait and see. If only...

As soon as she pulled up, it was obvious she’d crossed the “drinking” line. I was already furious that she’d kept him too late and I did not hold back in expressing my feelings. When I saw her eyes light up, I knew I had triggered her love for verbal battle. How she loved crushing my dad when he’d come home drunk and to take her on. *(In one instance, he’d learned of a pay increase when his bar pals congratulated him. But my mother, who always picked up his paycheck, never mentioned the humiliation!! That he was able to get so drunk – given the two one dollar bills she doled out to him on a daily basis, stemmed from the guys treating him out of pity).*

And so my mother was more than ready, fueled with booze, to take me on for daring to question her maternal authority. Eyes blazing, she proclaimed that my son was as much hers as he was mine.

Initially, I was shocked by her words, then my mind flashed back to long ago: How she'd buy me all those pretty school clothes, then, one by one, reclaim each piece as her own. How she tried to plan out my life so I'd never leave, etc., etc.; Be constantly under her control, as was my defeated father. What was mine was hers!!

She was a force to be reckoned with, and one I could never shake throughout my life. How else to explain how I ignored the "nice guys" and was drawn to the one who personified all that I hoped to escape.

## Chapter 52: The Long Island Expressway

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I recall the first time he took me “home” to East Rockaway. We’d left the bustling city and turned off at the sign reading “Long Island Expressway”. It was a long, tedious drive, following the route of the equally long (*hence the name, ha, ha*) commuter train line. I’d once come from opposite end at Montauk Point, and East Rockaway was somewhere in between. I figured the time it took to leave the city and arrive in New London – maybe even cross the ferry to Fishers Island, equaled the time spent on that expressway. That “detour” came to signify one of the many “Great Divides” in our marriage.

However, before moving on, there was one last episode with my mother after she declared ownership of my son:

I'd recently given birth to my second child in New London, where I was born. I'd stayed with my dad's aunt and family there, rather than risk giving birth in the Coast Guard cutter rushing me to the mainland. It was cowardly not to follow the lead of so many before me, but the thought of birthing on the high seas terrified me.

Anyway, I was settled at the back in my little apartment, shortly after returning home, both children asleep. Doors were never locked back then, but I didn't hear her enter. Yet, there she stood like some ethereal creature, Mommy Dearest. Without saying a word, she seemed to suddenly realize where she was, and, in a panic, stepped into the nearby closet, closing the door behind her.

This was too much for me and maybe I went a little nuts too. I swung that door open, saw her crouched in there and told her to get the hell away from me, or words to that effect.

Shaking, I finally composed myself and saw she'd left the closet and was gone. Then I sat, waiting for the familiar sound of that truck's engine, wondering why I hadn't heard it arrive. Did she walk all the way to my place?

No. There was the truck and there was my mother – or rather her legs protruding from beneath the truck. It was all too much. I called the guy downstairs and didn't sugarcoat the facts. Then I watched as he came out, asked what she was doing under the truck and her muffled reply that she was "changing a tire". Hard to recall now, but I assume he took my mother home, and my father retrieved the truck.

Did I mention it was getting dark and my mother had arrived in her usual nighttime attire? When I later spoke to my dad and laid out the facts – her showing up, upsetting me, etc., his only reply was "I know kid, but did you have to let that guy see her in a nightgown?"

After the dust settled, there was a short period of blessed calm. Then my husband called. He'd put in for a few days leave in honor of our new arrival. Excited, I assumed he was in New London waiting to board the next ferry.

Instead, he was calling from East Rockaway. Rather than driving straight through, he turned off at that familiar sign, the Long Island Expressway. Having, of course, spent the night, he was leaving early enough to catch the ferry to Fishers Island, and, surprise!!, was bringing his mother and Aunt Til with him. Not to worry, they would just spend the day and catch the late ferry to New London. Unprepared for company, I called my neighbor in panic. Bless her, she had a pot roast on hand and delivered it, fully cooked with vegetables, before the ferry whistle sounded. After a hearty meal, there was even time for all three to tour the island, before heading for the ferry. Then, it was just the three of us and I can't recall a moment of it.

## EPILOUGE

Not long after my husband had left from his short leave, my uncle showed up at my door. “Granny”, he said, had sent him with orders to pack me and the children up; that we were going to live with her from now on.

Given all that had gone on, I was (*to coin an old phrase*), quite “down in the dumps”, and there was Granny offering her protective bosom. From down there in the cove, she was kept abreast of things, including how my landlord (his wife) snuck into my apartment whenever I left on errands, etc; some criminal stuff on the guy downstairs, and my mother’s antics, of course. I was grateful, though, for the wife’s friendship. Especially, Demi, with her sad eyes (*It would be 30 years before I saw Demi again*)

## Chapter 53: The Gun

160

I don't know how it came about that we moved from Granny's to Norfolk, VA, but we moved into the same complex where Manny and Jean had once lived. The details are murky, but it was Uncle Jon who drove me down there, hauling a trailer. Somehow, Granny had put together some basic things – pots and pans and stuff, but the trailer was for her biggest contribution – her cast iron (*I'm sure*) washing machine – which for so many years I'd watched wheeled up to the kitchen sink and filled with water; and then the loud flap-flap sound of clothes churning around in there.

And so was my laundry day in Norfolk, as I maneuvered that beast on wheels to the sink. When finally relieved of it, I should have offered it to a museum.

Anyway, our stay came to an end when he, without input from me, signed up for shore duty in New York and our over long stay on Yarmouth Road.

The drinking had escalated in East Rockaway. He would have preferred, I'm sure, to have spent that shore duty alone, secure in the womb of his mother's house – something he admitted in a drunken haze, but less poetically. But, I hashed all that out in previous entries.

However, when we moved to Yarmouth Road, a gun was added to the mix. He had it all along, of course, but it became visible when kept, finally loaded under his pillow. As I right this, it seems unbelievable I didn't go ballistic over this. In truth, so much of the marriage had left by the wayside, I'd become somewhat numb (*what will be, will be*). It all goes back to page 36. The first time he pointed the gun to his head. I was shocked beyond words. Then, I wasn't.

I do believe the gun came from his dad's workshop and went with the bullets Aunt Til kept feeding to the flames.

In truth, a gun was an integral part of his being. As an Officer, later on, guns were assigned to him. For people like him, I suppose, guns are like a security blanket. Not too long ago, a son surprised me with a memory he had while back in San Diego; our final destination.

He and his dad were driving somewhere, when his dad suddenly reached under the seat and grabbed a gun; driving with the gun resting in his lap (*so "B-movie" like*). He claimed – in dramatic fashion – he was being followed, eyes darting back and forth.

The many times while on a family drive, he'd pull up to a pay phone, saying "got to check in". More dramatic affect. He never parked close enough so I could see if he was dialing or his mouth was moving. There seemed a need to impress. In his world, it was all about him. A confession he actually made on his deathbed. Why couldn't he had just been himself? The part I got to glimpse now and then...

## Chapter 54: Enough is Enough

162.1

Life on Yarmouth was becoming unbearable. Although I had lovely neighbors, I was the freak in the midst – the one without a husband, yet married. Now and then one of the gals would ask, in wonder, how I could “do without” for so long.

Yet, when he did come home for a brief stay, he made no effort to “meet” any of those who often lent a helping hand – except for Edna and Bill. I think he rather liked the fact that Bill was Puerto Rican. In fact, it proved a great advantage when his ship spent time there: Then, my husband got to enjoy the hospitality of Bill’s family – lots of good food and drink; and as he laughingly put it, waited on by all the young women.

Eventually, I began to ponder how so much seemed to his advantage: the ship’s homeport was in Norfolk and certainly didn’t leave that often.

In order to come home, he had to put in for off-and-on long weekends. The rest of the time, unless he had a duty watch, he was free as a bird to roam the city. Hell, he could eat out (*always had cash*), hit the bars – just live it up. And I, in turn....

Among the neighbors I had befriended, one was married to a realtor, and another to a lawyer. And so, when I made the decision to sell the house, move to Norfolk and upend his lovely arrangement (*Sorry, Commander. Sure hope your wife finally figured it out*), I had a Realtor and Lawyer already lined up.

Imagine how shocked the family was when I (*yes, with heart pounding*) informed them of my intent. And further shocked when told I'd hired licensed professionals. Strangely, my husband didn't go ballistic. Maybe just wondered what took me so long to figure it out.

Selling the house was indeed an act of courage. I was not a brave person. In fact, my mother's sphere of control, such as not allowing me to take the ferry to New London, deprived me of self confidence.

Traffic certainly terrified me, as did my one and only job: selling fishing lures – of all things – at the local store. Equally terrifying was my inability to make change (*still can't*).

I mostly was able to mask my shortcomings with an air of self-confidence; though over the years, my husband developed the innate ability to rip at my Achilles Heel. No matter my many shortcomings, as this journals shows, my mission was to always try to keep us together as a family.

If I never get to finish this, the sad truth is my husband was beyond reach – It was all about him and a wallet stuffed with cash.

## Chapter 55: Norfolk: A New Chapter, A New Beginning – Etc, Etc.

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I honestly was never sure what a military members job description entailed - whether at sea or on shore. Little by little, though, I became aware my husband had entered a certain realm of activity: First it was demolition work, then manuals on guerilla warfare, counter-insurgency, etc.

Throughout his career, he was stationed on amphibious ships – the smaller ones as opposed to carriers, etc. In Norfolk, scientists and the C.I.A. were often deployed on those smaller ships.

He became immersed in all of it – The SEAL's, UDT, parachuting, explosives, etc. During our stay, Admiral McClain headed the whole Amphibious Fleet. Here was my husband, nearing 40, his wife, persistent as hell, arriving with all his kids.

We (*that offensive word*) were stationed at Little Creek, VA and were able to move into military housing nearby – One section reserved for enlisted, the other for Officers.

Finally, I was no longer the “freak” in the neighborhood. There were older officers, like my husband, plucked from the enlisted ranks; then younger ones fresh from the Academy, as well as both Navy and Marine pilots. There were young parents, seasoned ones and some not there yet.

I was finally experiencing what had been denied me; the role of an Officer’s wife – but (*of course*) with limitations. For us “married with children wives”, there were others to lean on during deployments, now and then, a break from the mundane to attend one of the many cocktail parties with our husbands. Most anticipated, the lavish Marine Corps Ball. On the surface, a lovely departure from my previous life, but as always, a price to pay.

Did I mention that one Cardinal Rule? Never, ever was I to be a part of the waving crowd greeting returning ships. That his wee always the smaller amphibious ones, didn't matter. He hated the sight and sound of that cheering, waving throng of wives and kids (and girlfriends); another (sp?) clamor of guys racing down to loving embraces. This applied as well to airport greetings.

If his unit deployed, I would be the onlooker as the wives went shopping for the welcome home outfit. I was never once a part of that homecoming. Rather, the one pacing about waiting until he finally made an - as always – delayed appearance.

He liked to dramatize the fact that such trips were now aptly called 'assignments' and upon return, a 'briefing' was required. And did I mention the cocktail parties? The guys, huddling in a corner; the wives smoking and sipping wine, waiting for recognition. This wife for sure.

## Chapter 56: Manny and Jean

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Manny and Jean were now settled in a home close by and we would visit with the kids. I gave birth to my last and final child in Norfolk in 1969 (*Larry's note: Elizabeth's last child, Jean, was born in 1964*). And so what unfolded happened before the birth and after.

Its just hard to pinpoint time after so many years, but events are clear in memory.

I began to notice a dark mark on Jean's neck and it got darker and bigger with time. But given Jean's nature, I knew better than to invade her privacy with a question. Maybe if nothing was said, she could pretend otherwise – until it could no longer be ignored.

I(t) was Manny who told me that Jean was to undergo surgery to remove the growth in her neck. It was delicate surgery with some risks, such as paralysis, but the doctors didn't foresee a problem. Manny just didn't provide much detail, or express his feelings – Deep worry, I'm sure.

I still picture, in a tableau in my mind, the scene when I first visited Jean after the surgery: there she sat on a sofa, looking small and frail; Manny on one side of her, Joe on the other. Nothing seemed amiss until one or the other moved away, causing Jean to topple sideways. She was paralyzed (from) the waist up. Something went wrong during the surgery, but no details were offered other than Manny once mentioning how he had once considered suing the doctors.

So, one side of her body was now paralyzed and a tough road lay ahead. It was later revealed that Jean plunged into a deep depression, so severe, that Manny removed all the guns – his and Joe’s – from the home (*the Clemente men and their guns!!*). But, for what she described to me as smothering words of comfort meant to uplift the spirit, she took the reins.

In time, the good side got stronger, and she learned to navigate on her own. Dragging the useless side along. On one visit, she was positioned on the ground, busily tending to the garden. Once a talented seamstress who made her own beautifully tailored suits for work, she took on a lesser project – but with equal fervor:

Working with green felt, she one-handedly crafted a giant Xmas stocking for our kids. Each name engraved with yarn; jingling bells and figurines. That sock came out for years long after Jean died; (un)til finally discarded.

As mentioned, the cocktail parties were the fabric of life among the Officers Corps. We'd meet at each other's homes, when not at the club, etc. Somehow, the unit kept strictly together – like some exclusive club. There was a James Bond-esque flair to the activity around all of them.

And then came my turn to host a party. I'd attended enough to observe the protocol – mainly – enough booze to warm the pal (sp?), and something to munch on. We all knew each other, but always mindful of the Commanding Officer in attendance. Nonetheless, I was extremely nervous – a fact I didn't really want to let on to my husband. Mainly because I sensed a storm brewing. We did place a call to Hap in East Rockaway for his punch recipe – a fancy brew of champagne, liquors and such – and slices of fruit bobbing around. And, yes, I did own a punch bowl set.

Other than the call to East Rockaway to one of “The Boys”, he did little while I worked around his sullen presence (*How wonderful to have had at least one comforting squeeze on the shoulder*). The children had been fed and tucked away upstairs – resulting in a situation I look back on with regret – Something shared

By many other parents, I'm sure: During the evening, one or more child would beckon, from above, complaining of the smoke hurting all their eyes... Mea Culpa!!

I'd invited Jean to my little gathering, and she eagerly accepted. Manny brought her over ahead of time to make sure she was comfortably seated – her back supported. It was obvious she'd taken great pains to prepare for the evening. She had on a pretty outfit, her hair was done and she - with Manny's help, of course, had applied a bit of make-up. She just looked so happy to be there.

As we sat and chatted awaiting the first guest to arrive, came the burst of thunder as he strove into the room, eyes blazing, "What made you think you knew how to give a God Damned party?", he demanded. Then he turned and left the room. I looked at Jean mortified. I couldn't speak. Then, staring into my eyes, she softly said, "He's just nervous".

## Chapter 57: Officer's Row

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As mentioned, the neighbors were a mixture of different branches of the military. One young couple comprised a Navy pilot, his wife and little boy. The young mother would jokingly describe the young lad's preference for dolls, eschewing trucks and oh, my!! – airplanes.

The young pilot and I attended mass together each Sunday. There were two masses, so couples with children could take turns. As in East Rockaway, I never posed a threat to the wives – in spite of my previous “Lolita” label. (*Years later, though, when I hired a divorce lawyer, I became that label, AKA a divorcee*).

And then came the shattering news that the young pilot's plane had crashed and he was in intensive care. How one's life can change in the blink of an eye! The wife's drawn face as she returned from visiting him each day. When he was finally released, he looked so broken – His face creased with pain.

as he dragged a foot encased in what looked like cement. Soon after, the moving van arrived, and they were gone.

As previously mentioned, I've come to realize my husband was adept at being a no-show at critical times. As enlisted, he couldn't leave his duty posts; as an Officer, he had too many responsibilities, etc. etc. He could even be at his desk a short distance away at base. As time passed, I realized it was part of a complex nature. You wanted to love this man, but he didn't want your love. All he craved was respect.

Once he donned that officer's uniform, he became that man for all seasons; the guy the young men looked up to, etc. On page 125, I described, in his words what it all meant – how he developed that 'charisma', defined as a special gift endowing its possessor the ability to impress others.

Away from home, he was somebody. At home, he was still Little Billy from East Rockaway, who could never measure up to his dad and The Boys. He'd rather leave the home front responsibilities up to me, then criticize my shortcomings.

Maybe some levity is needed at this point, so I'll describe a weird encounter. Before, my husband suggested that maybe I befriended too many young people (*like his young admiring boys?*), and should cultivate women my age. Young folk would pop in: the young officer's wives, especially, were nervous about fitting in. One young gal, though, was nervous about an expected visitor – her father-in-law, who happened to be a Psychiatrist.

She begged me to please stop by when he was there to sort of lighten things. In all honesty, I was less than enthused at the prospect of meeting a “shrink”, having some

secret belief regarding their ability to maybe read minds, or sense what one is thinking. But I made a promise to her and dragged my feet over there.

With a look of relief, she invited me in. And there, sitting upright (*not relaxed*) in a living room chair, sat this (*no surprise*) stern looking man. He was older, gray-haired, with (*no surprise*) penetrating eyes. When she introduced me, he merely nodded, not saying a word, as if he went all out to play the scary role I envisioned. It was all too much for me, so I made some excuse about something in the oven and left. I was 30 years old and intimidated by a shrink.

Another young couple visited one day, wheeling the baby carriage over. If the baby were asleep inside, the carriage was left on the grass outside the door, guarded by the ever-vigilant family dog.

On one such visit, came the sound of an angry bark and loud yell. My young son, by his account, had merely passed the carriage on his way inside, unknowingly crossing the dog's line of protection. It sprang up, giving my son a nasty bite below the eye, drawing blood.

Without hesitation, the young father drove us to the medics on base, and so began the merry-go-round: one doctor after cleaning and examining the bite, declared – given its proximity to the brain – an immediate start of rabies treatment.

Terrified of putting my son through such pain, I sought the opinion of yet another doctor – He with a more “hearty” approach. “Hell”, he proclaimed, “same thing happened to my kid, and I almost shit a brick”. Then on a somber note, he said an allergy to the rabies injection could cause death. He suggested I call a few hospitals in the area (east coast) for more input.

My husband, at the time, was not deployed – meaning out of the country. He was on some assignment in nearby Maryland and reachable by phone. When I tearfully explained the situation (*even now I picture him behind a desk, cheek twitching, pressing his knuckles*), it was the same BS. He couldn't possibly leave his post, etc. and I had to handle it.

*Note: It should be said that these writings reflect how I now view the marriage as someone outside looking in. I'm telling a story that, given the state of today's world, may not get finished. Before losing her favor, I saw my mother-in law as the mother of all mothers – the one I wished I had. But she was my husband's mother, not mine.*

*But knowing her story – the wartime mistress and all, I could only admire how she carried on. "Peace at any price", she would say, and it became my mantra, but whose peace? Who paid the price? I'm consoled knowing my ex-husband remained out of reach to his second wife as well.*

Ironically, the first Naval hospital I called was in Bethesda, MD, probably a stones-throw from where he sat. Again, I got conflicting opinions. In the meantime, the young man tearfully offered to euthanize the dog to detect the presence of rabies – sending his wife in a fit of rage.

In the end, my decision not to start the injections was merely based on the fact that there was not one rabies case on record in Norfolk, VA. Not only was my husband not there to support me, the young wife remained angry and the couple never visited again. *Note: My husband and the young man, though, enjoyed friendly chats in the parking lot.*

Years and years later, a daughter surprised me by calling me strong. Nothing could be further from the truth: To quote one doctor, “You do what you gotta do.” It all started when my dad first tapped me on the shoulder in the dead of night to go fetch mom on her drunken night crawl.

## Chapter 58: Reflections (The Wallet)

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On our first stint in Norfolk, living in the apartment complex, I did a lot of walking when he was deployed – pushing a stroller, little ones tailing along. There was sort of a secondhand store on our route; furniture displayed out front and smaller items inside. I'd browse and maybe come across something like a three-legged stool for the kids to stand on while brushing teeth, etc.

One day as we chatted, the owner mentioned how he was a ham radio operator and how he'd been hooking up some of the wives with their deployed husbands. I was intrigued, having only seen ham operators in movies. I thought what a surprise for my (*Petty Officer, at the time*) husband if we got connected. So, it was arranged.

I hadn't noticed before, but back in the store was the setup as seen in movies. As I sat, he donned headset and so began the multitudes of sounds and call letters uttered by different voices – until came a familiar one:

The distinct Long Island sound of my husband. Then, the guy saying something to the effect that there was someone nearby waiting to say, Hi. After a quick lesson in the words, “over and out”, I let flow a bit of nervous chatter. That his response was less so, I attributed to his absolutely being blown away. In truth, I wasn’t overly enthused by that mode of communication. (*Years and years later, a son in the military placed such a short-wave call to me from London, putting me on the receiving end.*)

When my husband returned from that deployment, came the usual course of conduct I found so frustrating: It was like he was slowly separating himself from where he’d been, to where he was. With many bathroom visits in between, eventually, he came back to earth, so to speak.

This time it happened with a roar regarding the short-wave call, “Don’t you ever pull as stunt like that again”!!!

There was another episode during that time in Norfolk. I had just cashed my allotment check and we were headed to the store. When we pulled into the parking lot, the baby was on my lap in the front seat playing with my wallet.

Anxious to shop, I grabbed the baby and headed out, my husband somewhere in the rear. Then, I stopped, realizing the wallet was left behind. I walked past him the few short steps to the car, but the wallet wasn't there. In a panic, I looked around, but there was no one in sight – no car parked nearby. He said not a word, cheek twitching away.

After a fruitless search, of the front seat and all areas. His silence was unnerving – no expected caustic remarks. Not then, but much later came the memory of the time I thought I'd lost my ring. My tearful confession and how he reached into his pocket, then held it up saying, "Is this what you're looking for?" The ring wasn't lost, he took it from where I'd left it.

It was only years later that I imagined looking him in the eye and saying, “Okay, you made your point, had your fun, now open your damn jacket. I know my wallet’s in there.” Then, with a sheepish grin, he’d hand it over...

So, why didn’t I do just that? Because I couldn’t imagine him being so malicious. My mind hadn’t yet ventured into such territory. Instead, I called Meem in tears, and she sent that desperately needed money. My husband, in turn, gleefully strutting away with a wallet stuffed with cash.

*Note: Regarding the short-wave episode: I can’t help pondering life today: the deployed husband sitting in a tent, enjoying FaceTime with his wife – maybe reading a child’s bedtime story, the sound of battle in the distance.*

## Chapter 59: The Man From La Mancha

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I'm getting ahead of myself with that heading, but so much led up to it. How he imagined himself in the end as that pathetic character in a Broadway play. His haunting song, filled with longing, regret, etc. etc.

I was getting his uniform ready for dry cleaning – A weekly pick-up, delivery service on Officers' Row. Reaching into a pocket, I pulled out a slip of paper, neatly folded. Inside were the words PAWN SHOP and the name of an item I'd been searching for (*they'd been so many!*)

In my limited world, a pawn shop was a dingy place on some equally dingy street where, depicted in novels, a desperate mother pawned her wedding ring for money to feed her hungry children, or the criminal pawned stolen goods for cash. But not frequented by Naval Officers.

My ex-husband, in fact, wouldn't ever take empty bottles to the store for the refund money.

Even now, after all these years, the shock I felt in that moment was greater than any preceding it. It was as if he would go to any limits just to have a wallet stuffed with that almighty cash, and how long had it been going on? I thought back to the engagement ring. Did he contemplate pawning it? What else had he pawned?

Many years later when the marriage was ending, he looked me in the eye and, with a nasty grin, told me I was a damn fish for believing all his lies.

Yes, I was a fish, in terms of denial, but that all ended with that pawn ticket. I recall someone once saying, in a joking manner, "Let's get drunk and be somebody". That ticket in my hand symbolized his need to be somebody in any way possible. All I felt was sadness and confusion until, in time, I became familiar with the complex workings of an alcoholic mind through Al-Anon. In truth, he was incapable of love.

## Chapter 60: Manny and Jean – The Final Chapter

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As first mentioned in Chapter 36, I became aware of the mother/son relationship, which only strengthened over the years – something that wasn't readily apparent to me.

Once in East Rockaway, he actually found a part-time job during that turbulent year on shore duty. His mom called me one day to expound on that, “Isn't it wonderful that Bill found a part time job to bring in extra money?”, she sweetly asked.

That “job”, in fact, only added more stress to the “Home Sweet Home” that wasn't (*Chapter 127*). He tended bar at night, staying way past closing time; boozing it up with his hard earned pay. Wonderful, indeed, to have him stagger home, ready for a bit of gun play (*Chapter 160*) (*Page 36*).

“Not really”, I responded, “All he does is stay after hours, drinking it up the proceeds.” Silence on the other end.

Jean called one day with surprising news: Joe, living in Maryland, had gotten married. It came out of the blue, as nary a clue he was seeing someone. Then, to Jean's outrage, he described his new wife, Marion, as being Jean's age.

"He doesn't need another mother", she ranted, "he already has one!"

Considering Jean's state of mind, we stayed away when Joe brought Marion home to Norfolk to meet the folks. Manny, no doubt, displaying his usual calmness to diffuse any outbursts on Jean's part. I imagined the worst.

To my surprise, when Jean called after the visit, her voice sounded joyful. Turns out, she absolutely adored Marion and described how she, her late husband and Joe had been close friends. When the husband became terminally ill, Joe was there throughout, lending help and support to him, then offering as much to the widow, Marion. Then friendship developed into love, etc.

In the meantime, our life was changing. As previously mentioned, my husband's "career" had branched off in another direction. He was becoming entrenched in things to do with Special Warfare. Without ever confiding with me, he – a husband and father of six – was learning to parachute. There's a picture of him in front of Manny and Jean's home, kneeling down beside our newest arrival, sporting the orange jumpsuit, symbolizing his new status. He was working his way into that elite group (*mostly young men*) called Special Forces.

Today, each of our adult children has a copy of a tape made of their dad's exploits. One shows him training his young charges in guerilla type warfare, torture tactics, etc. In one scene he holds aloft a plump (*yes, cuddly*) rabbit, fresh from the pet store, and proceeds to club it to death – tasty jungle fare.

I suspect the purpose of the parachute jump, was to share

the experience with the young guys. This was obvious as I watched him interact with them on the tape. The fatherly way he softly smiled while helping one fit his harness properly, etc. Never had I seen such an expression with his own sons – only the sons of others.

I'm reminded of the time we went camping down near Morehead City, South Carolina. It was a lovely spot overlooking the ocean shortly after a hurricane had blown through – which, unfortunately, took away the beach. He rented out the tent and camping equipment from the base (*or maybe it was free*), and he and the boys set out to erect the tent. It was heavy canvas and came with spokes that would drive the tent securely in the ground.

Anyway, he surely erected many a tent while training his young charges. In this case, though, as he showed his sons how to hammer each stake

securely into the (*sand*) ground, there came a moment of truth: a gust of wind blew in from the sea; the stakes, not long enough to hold in sandy soil, popped out of the ground, collapsing the tent like a deflated balloon.

The boys started to giggle until they saw the look of fury on their dad's face. In his view, they were making fun of his ineptness. No doubt, if this had happened while on a training episode with those young charges, he would have led the laughter (*while, maybe, suppressing rage?*)

Anyway, this is about Manny and Jean, but their story only deepens the mystery of the character of the man I married – the dual personalities, the struggle to be somebody, his constant desire to be respected, not loved, and me, the clam digger, afraid to cross a crowded street, chose “The Man From La Mancha” as a life long mate (*He comes up much later in “The Man” CA*).

Then came word that Manny was in the hospital, diagnosed with pneumonia. This came about around the time I'd made a momentous decision that would shake things up:

After the birth of baby #7, my body told me that was it. Without consulting my husband (*why would I?*), I made an appointment with Dr. Dee – who was also Manny and Jean's doctor – about going on The Pill. By then, while not a devout Catholic, I had more or less “left the fold” and felt more comfortable with the term Agnostic (*Amend to “later” felt*).

Waiting until I began the regimen to inform him (*Note: the older kids, totally unaware, were already enjoying the benefits of mom's new prescription – a free Coke from the druggist when asked to pick it up*). And when the time came, I was curious about his reaction, and he didn't disappoint. His face revealed a two-fold reaction – first shock, then the look of downright fear. A loss of control???

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Then, drawing in a breath, he said, “I never thought you’d do it!”

Anyway, I knew Joe was around off and on because I was given the sad task of being with Jean when he came to remove the dog:

There were a few dogs I didn’t like. One being Granny Chestnut’s homely old thing, who had the animation of a slug. But, never left her side, if possible. There’s this vision of her Skippy at the dock, waiting while Granny prepared to row to the other side and her favorite clam and oyster beds. As soon as buckets, rakes and all were stored, Skippy roused himself to jump in and take position at the stern. And that’s where he stayed, as Granny – boat rope secured around her waist – dug for clams and scraped oysters from rocks. I do believe if Granny slipped and went under, old Skippy would have kept vigil at the stern, waiting for her to come up.

And then there was Jean’s dog:

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I recall less of him because, thankfully, I was around him/her (?) less. It was, of course, the fault of the owner that he became that undisciplined, ungainly spawn of Satan, who could kill with love.

It would have been lovely for Jean to have had one of today's sweet, trained companion dogs. Instead, he grew and grew into Jean's forever baby, who would run full force at her from across the room; or plop his oversized body on her frail lap. When he began to knock her to the ground and pin her there with "puppy" kisses, it was too much.

Somehow, I was delegated to be there, standing beside Jean, as Joe put a leash on the "puppy", who – without a backward glance – gleefully headed for the car, playfully tugging at the leash. I tried to be as consoling as possible, while so inwardly relieved..

I don't recall seeing Joe or not, while Manny was in the hospital, but my husband and I took Jean there for regular – mostly nightly – visits. But as time dragged on, I began to get the feeling Manny just seemed to be lolling about in that hospital bed. Never sight or sound of nurse or doctor – or clipboard on rail.

Once, as we prepared to leave, Manny made a strange gesture: lifting his arm as in the sign of the cross. In the car, heading home, Jean remarked, in a sarcastic tone, if Manny thought he was the damned Pope.

It was that gesture, though, that propelled me, the next day, to call Doctor Dee – this without any input from my husband. Actually, I took the risk of making a fool of myself in voicing my concern. Instead, I was shocked to hear him voice relief that someone finally contacted him; that he speak to someone other than Jean regarding Manny's prognosis.

Manny, the doctor informed me, had terminal brain cancer – something far beyond anything I could have imagined. In fact, before all this, an ever-widening dark patch had begun developing on Jean's neck – opposite the one that led to the surgery that paralyzed her one side. Manny had quietly mentioned it, but once, his voice catching, to reveal Jean's absolute refusal to discuss it. She knew, of course, what it meant.

So, I immediately called Joe, fearful my resolve might weaken. I just wanted to hand it all over to him, including the two-fold burden of informing both parents.

Sometimes I fear coming across as the smart know-it-all, which, from the start of all this, shows otherwise. Maybe, in lieu of self-confidence, though, I possess the instinct to know if something looks/walks like a duck, it probably is.

## Chapter 61: The Pill

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Around this time, I was having a private battle of my own with the pill—that momentous decision to free myself of the worry of a missed monthly period.

I thought back to East Rockaway and Saturday's confession day at St. Raymond's Church. There would be two lines, - the long one I was jokingly informed, where awaited the young priest - the favorite of the young wives. The other, shorter line, where awaited the old priest Dash, the favorite of the old ladies who sought solace in living with grumpy old husbands .. or so it seemed.

In fact, the young priest could be counted upon to never bring up the elephant in the room: the wives who practiced contraceptive birth control. "Don't ask, don't tell." Then I learned why not the old priest: in my choosing the short line, the screen opened and the old one got right down to business. "Are you married? Do you use contraceptives?"

And so, the other young wives who did, got to leave the confessional as sin free as me.

Eventually, though, the old priest and I had the encounter briefly touched upon much earlier in this journal (p. 36). It was to be my last visit to his, or any other confessional.

Seeking solace, I explained to the old priest the difficulty in the rhythm method when married to a military man who came and went. What do I do if he doesn't share my religious practices? "Then", roared the priest, "you are to consider yourself raped!"

I wondered how this would have played to my mother-in-law, who put the onus on me and considered her son the victim. (p. 36).

This though, played out in the early days, before alcohol and guns contributed to many unholy sexual encounters. So, why then did I continue the rhythm routine? It was a form of defense.

From the start, I experienced trouble, as my body didn't respond well to the pill – severe cramps, heavy bleeding, etc. Once, I had to make a mad dash to the hospital restroom while visiting Manny. When I mentioned said emergency to Jean, she expressed her view that, “God hated women. That's why he caused them to bleed so much.”

That was an extreme view, but there was resentment that there was no “Free At Last” feeling from then on. You'd think, though, that my husband – having grown up in a house full of females, would have been “aware” of things. But maybe, he was exposed to too much, which would explain his disgust at the sight of female blood.

Anyway, said blood followed me cross-country to CA, until it became so severe the military docs assigned me to a Gynecologist – in short demand in the Navy – who diagnosed a tumor – this after a 6-month wait. After another wait, came a hysterectomy – the ultimate birth control.

## Chapter 62: Dearest Manny: But for the Need of a Shave...

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I've kept putting off this chapter – the guilt, anger, remorse, etc., as I played it in my head, after my call to Joe, he, thankfully, took over & Manny was released from the hospital.

In the meantime, life went on on Officer's Row – dog bites, pawn tickets, social affairs, mysterious calls in the night sending him off on some clandestine activity, etc., etc. As for Manny & Jean, so much is a blank. Surely, we must have visited & kept in touch – Joe remaining in Maryland with new wife, Marion.

What remains vivid in my memory, though, is the dinner invitation from Manny. Obviously in remission, he drove over & whisked me to the #1 eating spot – the drive-in.

As we sat eating hamburgers & fries, chatting about this and that, he finally came to the crux of the matter!

“Betty”, he calmly said, “I know I’m dying.” Of course, I rebuked him for saying such a thing, but then sat back and let him talk. He spoke of having many regrets, but I was too numb to digest his words. Then, to my amazement, he said he started attending mass again and thanked me for that.

Here I was, trying to break free from those ties, and dear Manny crediting me for drawing him back. No way did I ever preach any beliefs – despising holier-than-thou’s like Bernice, etc.

But no, that wasn’t it. Manny, instead, spoke of how I, as a person, had influenced him to seek evidence and light – or words to that effect.

I felt tears welling because no one, as yet, had ever uttered such words to me. Maybe, after all, I did have some positive impact on others. I never told anyone of our conversation – it was mine to keep.

Then came the call from Jean: Manny, she blurted out, was walking around talking to dead people. All along, I had wondered when or if the brain cancer would manifest itself. I'd been annoyed at what seemed to be Joe's inaction and chose not to question him, re: his talk with the doctor; what he did or didn't tell Manny and Jean.

I suspect, though, that Manny would have been adamant about keeping Jean in the dark. If so, how frightening for her to see him so out of control. Is it possible, she asked, for Bill to come over and calm Manny down? Maybe get him to go to bed?

So, I called my husband at his work across the way at Little Creek Base. He answered right away, so was at his desk; sounded quite relaxed. I, of course, was upset' explained Manny's condition and asked if he could please pop over there.

After hearing me out, he no longer sounded relaxed. Rather, he was now in the throes of important work and couldn't possibly leave the base.

I envisioned myself grabbing up the kids and heading for the nearest bus stop. What a scene that would have been. Manny holding court with the dead, the kids frozen in fear...

How nice, though, if his nephew had showed up, just so Manny could hear his voice, bring him back to reality...

The situation was all so wrong on so many levels. Things were quiet for a while, and I don't know if Joe was in touch or not – my anger toward he and my husband (was) kept at bay.

Then Jean called again. Manny was agitated, out of it (and) seeing dead people. So, again, I called my husband practically begging for him to go over there. Same excuse. And with Jean, I couldn't bring up the "Elephant in The Room" – the cancer eating Manny's brain (*Yet, was she all too aware?*)

It was a Saturday or Sunday morning. My then husband had driven off somewhere – a common thing. First came the sound of an approaching car at high speed; the screeching of brakes, loud slamming of the car door – followed by that of the front door. Then, in he came, face flushed with anger. Eyes blazing...

As I stood wide-eyed, fearful, he began to rage at how Joe had taken from him what he seemed to perceive as his solemn task: Giving Manny a shave.

What was this, I wondered, some clandestine operation straight from one of his manuals? Had he snuck over there once, twice, as a sort of penance for those other times? No doubt he would have checked first. To make sure Manny wasn't talking to those dead people.

What transpired, I wondered, when he walked in and saw Joe performing

his solemn task. Did he sit and chat, rage building up? Or did he explode in anger, exiting in dramatic fashion? I never found out.

No doubt, he saved the brunt of his anger for my benefit. It was a brutal display of red-hot words forbidding me to have nothing to do with those people ever again.

Maybe things would have been different for me as far as the lingering guilt, etc., if not for my mother-in-law's call in the wake of it all. Isn't it awful, she said, how Joe took over shaving Manny? When I replied that Joe certainly had the right to shave his own father, there was the usual silence at the other end.

What made her call significant to me, however, was the awareness that my husband probably had regular phone contact with his mother on free government time.

Anyway, did I comply with my husband's demand out of fear or follow what I still perceived as his mother's words of wisdom? – PEACE AT ANY PRICE...

In my blurred memory, all that remains is learning that Joe had to remove Manny & Jean from their home and into separate facilities in Maryland. Then came word that Manny had died. It was all too much – the thought of Jean now all alone, dying herself, drove me to pick up the phone and reach out to her. The hope being that in her fragile memory little time had passed since we last spoke.

Knowing how Jean hated sentiment, I spoke of regular things; my desire to just touch base. Her voice weak, I sensed in those few words that she was resigned to it all... knew what was coming. Not long afterward, she, too, passed away. My inaction still haunts me.

The subject of Manny and Jean was forever closed between my husband and I. PEACE AT ANY PRICE!!

## Chapter 63: Officer's Row (More Tidbits)

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There's this need to get through this journal, as memories fade with age – especially those of Norfolk. Also, my vision keeps getting weaker.

Carolyn De Cota was a young Marine wife with a couple boys named Chip and Dale. She was a bubbly sort – At least on the surface. Her husband was a heavy drinker – so much so, he would often head to the Enlisted Club to keep out of sight of his fellow officers. (*The Enlisted guys were not pleased*). She described the evening ritual imposed by her husband: the boys, so adoreable, were to be fed and ready for bed (or in bed) when he showed up for dinner. This because he preferred to eat in peace and quiet. This rule so imposed whether he was drunk or sober.

When my last child was born, Carolyn gave me a surprise shower. The new baby seats enabled the baby to perched on the table, a part of things,

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the mom, hands free. So there she perched among the strawberries and cream, finger sandwiches, etc.

Then, the opening of gifts. It was so sweet of Carolyn to do this for me.

The Fegley's, Jim and Sally, lived next door to us. They were the oldest, with (2) teen-agers – a boy and a girl. Jim was a Marine pilot – a quiet, easy-going sort. Sally was from Deep South Georgia. I make this distinction given her attitude when President Kennedy died:

While I was wringing hands and distraught, Sally calmly went about her business, preparing (*gasp!*) to keep her hairdresser appointment. I recall her words; “I’m sorry he (Kennedy) was shot, but I never cared for him as President.”

When Jim was home, it was always Sally who answered the phone as he contended with a stutter. I wondered how that played out in the cockpit of a jet. Different strokes, I guess.

When I first befriended Sally, my ex expressed reservations about husband Jim being of a higher rank than him – this AFTER suggesting maybe I spent too much time with the younger wives.

(It was years before the term “control” was presented to me, as with my mother, I just adapted to being controlled).

Don Smith, his wife and young (precious) daughter lived catty-corner from us. Don, I thought, was a busy body type – into other people’s business. Once, the little girl dashed out the door and headed straight for my lap, exposing her measles-covered body to mine. This meant dragging my pregnant self downtown for the Gamma injection to protect the fetus.

Further down the circle lived a young attractive gal. I don’t recall ever seeing her Naval Officer husband, but like a few other young couples, they were childless.

She seemed outgoing and pleasant, but there was this quirk that revealed itself at every Sunday mass. As mentioned, it was held in the movie theatre, where I attended with the young pilot. Like clockwork, as soon as mass started, she would appear. Beautifully dressed, platinum hair cascading down her back. Then, her long legs striding down the aisle, she would head for a seat nearest the front. So many young, uniformed eyes following her every (languid) move. Even the priest, an Officer himself, would pause for a glance.

Then one morning, the street was abuzz with the news that our young gal had attempted suicide by slashing her wrist. According to “sources”, this came about following her husband’s orders to deploy. She recovered, husband stayed put and she happily related an apartment do-over with a Sears Roebuck decorator. My orders from the Controller: “Don’t you ever pull a stunt like that!!!”

Jim and Sally's daughter usually babysat for the Smith's, but when she was unavailable, her brother, Jim took her place. One evening as he did so, Sally and Jim were preparing for the annual Marine Corps Ball – a Gala event with women in ball gowns, the men in full-dress uniforms – the Marine's always the most elegant (my then husband was on another extended deployment – and more on that later).

The next morning, a distraught Sally related the grim happenings of the night before: As she and Jim returned home – she, elegantly gowned, he in full-dress uniform, Don Smith was there to greet them – or rather accost them.

Their son, Jim, according to their 'precious' daughter, had touched her in a private place. What all that entailed was left blowing in the wind as the precious little one had nothing more to add. I could picture her mother,

a bit scatter-brained, fumbling her way through the good touching / bad touching speech.

In the meantime, son Jim is fast asleep inside, unaware he was being pegged a child molester. He was mortified, of course, when his parents relayed Don's account. Did he playfully grab her and touch of bit of something. My goodness, shw of the times she needed help on the potty. Why all this now? My guess is Mommy fueled the child's imagination. None of us believed the story. The Smith's lost a baby sitter and, as in military life, transfer orders ended conflicts (first the Smith's, then the Fegley's).

Back to those deployments: Back in time, when he served aboard ships, it was common practice for wives to call a certain (phone) number and receive info on a ships expected return to port. It gave time to prepare and shop for that special welcome home outfit to greet the ship's arrival. I, of course,

was excluded from that.

In Norfolk, my husband – now embedded in things related to Special Forces, was attached more to a unit. Whenever he left on some assignment, I had no idea of the when, where, how... We were at war in Vietnam and he seemed to relish those assignments. I'd cry and he relished the drama with well-scripted words; "Just so you know, I might not make it back alive." (*GOD, what a bastard!*)...

The unit, if possible, would keep me informed of return dates – usually by plane – but unlike other wives, I didn't dare show up at the airport.

Anyway, all that became a moot point, when word would come that he offered to extend his deployment. Then I'd worry about money. When, if, how much, would trickle in. I do believe when he left on a deployment,

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he succeeded in blocking the existence of a wife and six kids from his mind.

I was now aware of the Pawn Shop Business – which was just an extension of things in East Rockaway. His need for \$ (money) knew no bounds and continued throughout the 2<sup>nd</sup> marriage until his death. I learned, too, that he would borrow cash from guys in the unit, with an appropriate story to match. All this came (to) light thanks to busy-body, Don Smith!

Often, in the middle of the night, would come a phone call. He'd start getting his gear together, reaching up over the stove for the case of ammo and condoms (*to protect rifles in water*) stored there. I never knew where he was going or how long. Sometimes it was a few days, which left me to wonder if there was a training spot in the nearby mountains (*Later proved with the infamous tape of "Daddy's Work"*). He, of course,

performed the usual drama of it being all about him.

Shortly after he left, came a knock at the door and there stood Don Smith. Now, he had no connection to my husband's Special Services Branch, but he was sent to deliver a message from him and Don relished delivering his little speech.

It was a known fact that I held the purse strings and poor husband had to be content with what I doled out to him (*I do believe he dredged up the story I told him way back of my mother's control of the \$\$ and "doling" out my dad's daily stipend of beer money*). So like my mother's retained memory!

Obviously, as soon as he made his drama exit, he called Don to come do his dirty work. For the sake of the children, I was justified in saying no (*This was food money. Doesn't the military feed its people?*). But that would have fed into the fairy tail of the wicked witch.

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In retrospect, I didn't have the guts, nor was I yet ready to believe the truth of things. Often, when I expressed an opinion, he'd say in a sneering tone, "Yeah, you've been to every drugstore in the country."

Definitions as looked up in the dictionary:

CONTROL: To check or regulate; to exercise restraint or direction over. Dominate/Command.

I recall my uncle warning me on getting involved with the "city slicker" type (*this after my mother lied and said I lost interest in the college he offered to finance*).

NAÏVE: Having simple or trusting nature. Lacking careful judgement. Unsophisticated. Lacking experience.

Yet, deep down, in heart and soul there was always that glimmer of hope. There would be moments when that wretched mask would be lifted and I'd glimpse the naked face once seen in tender moments. But that defines naïveté. There just were no tender moments. He was not a romantic!!

## Chapter 64: A Marine's Funeral

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I give this chapter a special mention because the event must have stuck in my now ex-husband's craw As he lolled in Okinawa years later (*as related to our son*).

One more mentioned, though, of those extended deployments: As more and more of those return dates came and went, I once vented my frustration while visiting Sally and Jim next door. Jim responded in anger, stating how those extensions served to prove my husband's dedication to his country. It revealed to me my husband's solid reputation as a dedicated officer and family man to those such as Jim and (busy-body) Don Smith. Mine would prove a losing battle as one final "extension" out west in California ended the marriage.

I don't recall who transferred first - The De Cota's or the Fegley's. One family heading to North Carolina, the other to South Carolina.

Then came a call from Sally with the news that Carolyn's husband had been killed in Vietnam, and she requested we be there with her for the service.

For once, my husband was home, and unhappily so when I told him of my intentions to honor Carolyn's wishes. It constituted two nights away, but he clearly blanched at the thought of being "parent in charge." This time he wasn't hiding behind a desk claiming a call to duty. Instead, he had no recourse but to arrange bus travel for my less than joyful attendance at a military funeral.

I hated traveling alone, always fearful of getting lost. The bus went straight to North Carolina, with about as much stops as the Long Island commuter train. It was hot, stuffy, crowded, with passengers entering and leaving. What a relief to see Sally when the bus pulled into the North Carolina depot.

(Note: Looking back, I never had what I'd call a "comfortable" relationship with Sally. On Officer's Row, I'd pop in for coffee now and then, but I was always aware (thanks to my husband) of her husband's higher rank. She was older and displayed a bit of that deep Southern Reserve, and certainly not one to "pop in" on others. Carolyn, though, a fellow mariner wife, had a closer connection, yet, what I would call Sally's 'relaxed' ways, kept her from being snobbish. She was a terrible housekeeper. We all had roaches, but hers were more free to roam.

Anyway, the plan was to spend the night at Sally's and head to South Carolina in the morning. Husband, Jim, was deployed, and it was just her and the two other children – quiet and well-mannered as always. I just have a faint memory now of things: a southern-cooked chicken dinner and then relaxing with the military gals favorite drink at the time: vodka and cranberry juice.

Alluding to something previously mentioned: I had occasion to get ice from the (re)fridge(rator) that sat in the garage. There, I had to step around a mother cat and her litter of kittens; some scampering in and out of the overflowing litterbox. Getting ice though, was a challenge as the fridge was in dire need of a defrost; my arm reaching through a wall of ice to retrieve a tray – and the roaches were even thicker in North Carolina!!

The next morning, we were on our way to South Carolina. I recall heading to the car and then sensing that the grass beneath my feet was moving. It was alive with swarms of tiny frogs, so many being squashed beneath my feet as I hurried to reach the car. Sally hardly paid attention to them. Anyway, I don't think we talked much, each aware of what was ahead as we made – what seemed – a short journey to South Carolina.

So Much Has Been Forgotten....

A little house upon a hill. Looking down, I could see the shrimp boats plying up and down the river. In the kitchen, though, I was struck by the sight of that little one sitting in the high chair – a gorgeous baby girl with thick black hair and rosy cheeks. She was probably 6 months old by then. At least he left behind something precious; along, of course, with Chip and Dale – still their sweet selves.

Carolyn was so anxious to talk and we somehow found the time – kicking back with the old reliable, cranberry juice and vodka. Either while still on Officer's Row or settled in South Carolina, Carolyn had finally made the decision to seek a divorce. Fate intervened and two things happened in succession: She became pregnant and he received orders to Vietnam.

In her view, she would otherwise have missed all the attention and benefits she was experiencing. She didn't mince words.

Then she described how she was notified he'd been killed: There was a knock on the door early in the morning. When she opened and saw Marines in uniform, she screamed, "NO" and ran back to the bedroom, slamming the door shut. There was this crazy feeling that as long as she stayed behind that door, she'd be shielded from the truth.

But those guys barged right in. This is what they did – a duty they performed and were damned good at. They helped dress Carolyn, then moved on to the kids. In the midst of it all, Carolyn was quietly given the details of her husband's death:

He'd just finished talking to Vice President (Lyndon Baines) Johnson when a mortar hit the tent, killing him instantly. They explained that before the body was flown back to the states, the plastic surgeons had reconstructed his face and they felt she'd be pleased with the results.

Later, we found ourselves in a room containing the casket. I recall Carolyn

Standing there; her hand on the casket lever asking if we wanted to see what was essentially a plastic replica of her husband's face. Both Sally and I politely said, "No", mumbling in unison how we preferred remembering him as before. Quite frankly, I couldn't recall ever seeing the guy, but just hearing of his less than stellar reputation. At least Carolyn can reap the financial benefits due the widow of a fallen Marine.

Sometime during the day, I called home to check in. As expected (*though hope always springs eternal*), he was his usual sulky self when left (*so seldom!*) in charge. He'd rather have met the Taliban head on. Not one question about me or the others; just all about him.

The one memory that always stands out is standing in this lovely small cemetery in the midst of moss-draped trees. So serene and quiet. Then came the Marine Color Guard, carrying the casket – 3 on each side.

Most noticeable was the lone black Marine – a big handsome guy. All six, in splendid uniforms, marching in perfect cadence. But this was the Deep South, after all, so no surprise when in the aftermath, came a dissenter; a grey-haired Southern lady lamenting how such a beautiful ceremony (“*I do declare*”, *etc...*), had to be spoiled by sticking that black face in there. Her words garnered a few nods of agreement. Thankfully, Sally gave no reaction.

I was to see Carolyn one more time when she came alone for a weekend visit, not long after the funeral. What happened was not unusual in recent widows, but worth mentioning: My husband, Carolyn and I were in conversation when she suddenly threw her arms around my husband. I almost laughed watching him caught off guard. Then, glaring at me, he mouthed the words: “This is all your fault!” I just let the scene play out. (*so unlike his reaction when I hugged Bill Gil in East Rockaway*).

## Chapter 65: The Good Daughter

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I was living in East Rockaway when my Grandpa Chestnut died. Though my husband was deployed, there was no question I'd head for the island, children in tow. My grandmother expected me and I always felt duty-bound when the family reached out. In truth, I preferred not having to deal with my husband's prickly attitude toward the fishermen, i.e. "*The Haughty Hunter*".

It was Hap who offered to be our guide on the Long Island train; our transfer to Grand Central and then safely aboard the train heading to New London. (*NOTE: I never could differentiate between Grand Central and Penn Station. But it was necessary to change from one to another – within walking distance. Looking back, that I could even change train stations on my own, shows I'd come a long way since that terrifying moment my husband (laughingly) deserted me in the middle of New York City traffic.*) And later, the babies and toddlers in tow, I would first board

propeller driven planes and then on to passenger jets. Yet, I never got over being terrified I'd get lost – my flawed sense of direction another bit of baggage I took with me as I slipped off the island and head long into marriage.

Following the funeral, my plans to head back to East Rockaway went haywire (*something to do, of course, with Bernice holding things up*) and my presence with the kids an unfair burden to my Aunt and her kids all under one roof. Then, my Uncle Bill came to the rescue.

He offered to drive us back to East Rockaway – via two ferry rides: after alighting from the Fishers Island Ferry in New London, we then boarded the Montauk Ferry which took us to the tip of Long Island. From there, we drove the length of Long Island to my home in East Rockaway.

However, there was no question of his spending the night – though he was

obviously thrilled to see my home and where we lived – as he had yet another passenger to deliver:

When Uncle Ted's girlfriend, who came for the funeral, announced plans to return to Connecticut, Uncle Bill invited her to come along with us. How he kept up the pace, was amazing, but he just turned around and drove her home to Connecticut, then onto the Fishers Island Ferry and home.

I don't think I truly appreciated my uncle's beautiful gesture. Actually, I felt more guilt-ridden over the time and money he sacrificed. Then, something came to mind (which) I had actually forgotten:

Sometime ago when I was newly settled on Yarmouth Road – my home in East Rockaway – I received a call from Fishers Island. It was a family member asking if my younger cousin could come and stay with me for a while. Apparently, she was quite pregnant – an event occurring while

she and the father-to-be were still students at the school. The pregnant cousin was my Uncle Bill's daughter.

It was felt that my cousin's condition would be too distracting for the father-to-be as he struggled to study for his finals in order to graduate (*He was slated to go on to college*).

Luckily, my husband was deployed (*his presence would have been unbearable*). As it were, I was not that comfortable. For one thing, she was heavily pregnant, and her blithe attitude was a bit grating. I used to babysit for her, and here she was going on about how she was going to be an old-fashioned mother, whatever that meant. Never once did she ask my advice about anything. So, I saw to her comfort, while tending to the needs of my children.

*(Note: to this day, my cousin enjoys a successful marriage with*

*that baby's father. And she also later gave birth to twins. To "frost the cake", so to speak, one daughter (maybe that 1<sup>st</sup> born) actually did what no other local lass ever was able to accomplish: she married into one of the islands wealthy summer denizens).*

It was not long after my pregnant cousin returned home – the dad-to-be having graduated – that my dad made a surprise visit. Although my mother curtailed my lone visits to the mainland, she had to relinquish such control over my dad due to his duty as “volunteer fireman”; so he got to “escape” now and then. One such trip somehow brought him in my vicinity.

As he sat in my kitchen, fidgeting, not at all comfortable, I knew he was anxious to be on his way – to squeeze ever ounce of freedom afforded him. He displayed no interest in me or his grandkids,

but was most eager to expound on my cousin's plight. "That poor kid", he lamented, "She got caught up in something beyond her control." No mention though, that I sheltered that "poor kid".

As he went on and on, my mind went back to the time I was still in school and begun dating my husband-to-be. He had pulled up in the driveway directly under my parent's bedroom window, and we were still sitting thin the car – a rather small model – just chatting. Then, the downstairs kitchen door flew open, and my father flew out like some mad demon. He kept ranting on about out indulging in some nasty sexual acts; my eyes driving up to my mother, glued to the window. She, of course, had egged him on, wallowing in the drama. She had an amazing knack for getting my dad to run through hoops.

So here was my dad, the one who'd wake me up late at night

to drag my drunken mother home, spouting words of pity for my fallen cousin, but never, ever a word of praise for the “good daughter”.

When he stood at the door, preparing to leave, I knew he hoped, as was once my habit, that I’d press a wad of cash in his hand. Sorry dad, that well went dry.

From then on, until he died, my father – with my mother’s urging – saw me as the “EVIL DAUGHTER” (*Yes, later, on my final trip to the island, his hatred of me had been well nourished*). (*Note: This journal is slow going. My weak vision might not last to the end. We will see.*)

There is one final memory worth noting regarding my cousin and her daughter’s wealthy marriage: As most of the locals, my cousin’s mother, Aunt Rose, also worked for one of the summer visitors. She once described how the gentlemen would

return from the beach and Aunt Rose would bathe his sandy feet in a pan of warm water. I recall making an “ugh” sound, but my aunt didn’t mind at all.

Fast forward to the time my husband came with me on an island visit and Aunt Rose was anxious to show us a gift from her employer – the man whose feet she bathed:

It was a large, signed portrait of the gentleman, posing with the Royal Family during his time as the Ambassador to England. My husband, displayed his usual disdain for the lesser folks (*the fishermen*), snorted and said, “BIG DEAL!” Times like that, I was tempted to kick him in the groin.

I’m reminded of the guy who jokingly said, “Let’s get drunk and be somebody.” My husband always wanted to be “somebody”, and with a wallet bulging with cash. It’s strange that his mother was a “fisherman” like me – or rather a “clam digger”.

It bothered him that his mother only had a 4<sup>th</sup> grade education. Is that why, though I did graduate high school, he denied me every chance to take a college course? Maybe I stayed with him all those years (*where would I go, anyway?*), was that after striving to be a Good Daughter, I strove to be a Good Wife.

In truth, I was a Good Daughter in that I spared my mother the consequences of my suppressed rage and actions (*Gather up all those empty liquor bottles, stolen from her employers, so the garbage collectors – the Village Criers – could spread the word around – call the Constable when she threatened suicide, etc*), the same sparing of the truth in things regarding my husband – which, according to him would “ruin my career”... *unquote*... In truth, it’s not possible to be a Good Daughter or a Good Wife, when the effort is not worthy.

## Chapter 66: Granny's Funeral

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[CONTROL (defined): To check or regulate. To exercise restraint or direction over. (*“Stay away from Officer's pool.” “Don't ever pull a stunt like that again”, etc.*). Such control could be subtle: sly in design, cunningly devised. But, mostly difficult to understand.]

### Granny's Funeral

Once back in Norfolk, my connection to the island dwindled. I probably distanced myself or was preoccupied in my efforts to be “The Good Wife”.

When word came that Granny had passed away, it was my intention to go back and pay my final respects to her, but without burdening the family, again, with my children. This time, my husband was not deployed, and it was my intention to leave the children with him for that short while – thus sparing him having to endure those lowly fishermen.

Instead, he expressed his intention to pay his respects as well. Immediately, I felt the bile well up in my throat! Anything was preferable to him other than being dad-in-charge for one lousy day and night.

So, early in the A.M., I had the kids packed and ready, wondering what was holding dad up. And then, he strode into the room, impeccable in his full-dress Officer's uniform. My mouth opened to say, "WHAT?!!", but I knew better than to risk unleashing that ugly temper.

Oh, yes, some would say. How dare I question my husband's desire to honor Granny's memory in such a way. Well, honor had nothing to do with it. Throughout, he never broke rank, displaying his haughty self to one and all. Except for a few fleeting memories, that trip remains a blur and it would be years before I returned to the island.

## Chapter 67: The Sailor

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After this entry was written, I had a surprising conversation with one of my sons. Although reluctant to include my children in this personal journal, this son, best described as the “Social Gatherer” of the family, offered a whole new perspective on the puzzle he refers to as “The Old Man” – his dad and my ex:

In truth, when I married him, I did wonder why he chose to remain in the military – especially when he could have joined his dad and brothers-in-law in the business. It would have meant a bit of schooling, and then commuting back-and-forth to the city – both of which he deplored. (*Yet, how he despised the brothers-in-law for their successes*).

In truth, I accepted that he intended to stay in the military, but failed to realize that he lacked much ambition otherwise.

I, in fact, was the one who was an ardent reader (*unlike him*) but failed in attempts to take a couple of community college courses (“*Don’t want a wife smarter than me.*”).

When, those years later, the Officer’s Commission came about, it was offered to a number of “old timers” – and stipulated that they could never go beyond Lieutenant Commander (*never full Commander*). I recall he was also offered a Chief Warrant Officer gig – considered neither “fish or fowl” in Navy jargon. In truth, it was handed to him (*the commission*) without his ever opening a book.

In fact, it was only when he became obsessed with guerilla warfare that he became an obsessed reader – eventually donning a kimono, rum bottle

tucked in its flowing sleeves, pacing back and forth, memorizing ways to torture and maim.

It was the Officer's uniform that allowed him to be "somebody"; but behind closed doors, with his gun and vulnerability, he became what he always was – according to his son – nothing but a sailor. He couldn't shed that old skin.

What comes to mind is the oft-repeated scene of my husband – the father of our children – the decorated Officer, weaving side-to-side as he drunkenly declared how he didn't want to be loved; how he wanted nothing but respect.

In truth, it was all a charade – those fine words about wanting respect. On his deathbed, he willingly admitted it was all about him and money – the glow of the drunken sailor on payday... wallet stuffed with cash...

(subheading: PEACE AT ANY PRICE)

It's so easy when life is about over, to look back and reflect on things. How I left the island, right out of high school, as a married woman. It wasn't so much that I had a new husband, but that I left one mother and moved in with another.

In retrospect, I allowed my adoration for my husband's mother to become so extreme that she became a guiding light. I was young and impressionable, and she was so far removed from my own mother. Early on, I saw how her children, including my husband, gravitated toward her. She always had a way of attracting people – the rich and the not-so-rich. She had a warm personality and rich sense of humor. She was so welcoming to me and I often found her company more enjoyable than my husband's. (*I've already delved into the mother/son relationship*).

And so, when she would so often recite the words, “Peace at any price”, it sounded so lofty and wise. It became my credo as well.

But many years too late, I questioned what the hell it really meant. The words quietness, harmony, etc. come to mind. But was it for herself, or the other? And what price was she willing to pay? That she took an unfaithful husband back and bore his often-cold presence seemed more to his advantage.

No doubt, she would have expected me to follow her example in what was my troubled marriage. Much too late, I realized the price was too high. I sensed her disappointment in me. Her withdrawal. In the end, blood proved thicker than water, when he returned to that place called home, new wife in tow, he was welcomed back into the fold. Peace, etc., etc...

## Chapter 68: Afterthoughts

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Since closing the chapter on Granny's funeral – my final goodbye – some memories have resurfaced. I recall Uncle Ed being at the ferry landing in New London. How later, as we stood chatting in the upstairs cabin, the boat suddenly lurched downward – a most unpleasant feeling. Uncle Ed, in his quiet way, explained that it was the hearse, carrying Granny's body, coming aboard.

Later, as the ferry made its 45-minute trip to the island, Uncle Ed engaged the two young funeral directors in conversation. This was Uncle Ed, the Great Communicator.

Aunt Trudy once told the story of his Sunday strolls through the little town where they lived in Quebec, Canada. He'd often return with some fellow he met and they'd chat over coffee. Once, he actually brought home the town's mayor. Before leaving, the mayor asked to use the bathroom and then bid a cheerful adieu.

Later, when Trudy looked in there, she was horrified to see the Sunday papers strewn all over the floor – thrown page by page from Ed's perch on the thrown.

As with Grandpa, Granny's body was on display in the living room. Ever since the nuns forced me to view the embalmed bodies of those Italian boys, I found no solace in a replica of what was once a living being – including my own son.

But, in defiance of my husband, I sat on the sofa, in clear view of what was once Granny, throughout the night. Once, a white dove flew onto the roof of the house next door and stayed all night. It was probably its regular nightly perch.

Now and then Aunt Ann, in her chenille robe and floppy slippers, would weave her way to the coffin and give (*what was once*) Granny a big hug. I'd glance at my husband and see from his look, how primitive a display he was witnessing.

What's laughable, though, is the fact that I probably attended more open-casket displays with his mother than in my own family. I never could figure out all the different family connections, whether related to Meem or my Father-in-law. There were cousins galore and even an Irish branch with the romantic name, Peter Dundon (*Dundun?*)

Anyway, I'd tag along with Meem to some far off places in Queens or Brooklyn. I recall houses with tall ceilings and drafty rooms – the kitchens with the original linoleum floors and cast iron stoves. And, always, centered just right in front of maybe the only window offering light, would be the open casket.

Once I recall sitting in an old kitchen with Meem, chatting with the deceased's relatives – an older couple I mistook for married, but were actually sister and brother.

The brother – it turned out – rather a minor celebrity: He had once been President Coolidge’s personal tailor (...*or was it Hoover?*).

Once, though, when my husband was actually home (*not deployed*), he got to accompany Meem to one such wake – the Jackpot, so to speak: Another old, drafty house in the boroughs. The (*unknown*) deceased in full view. This time, though, those paying respect were members of the clergy – nuns, priests, Monsignors, etc. – all chatting as they enjoyed generous amounts of alcoholic refreshments.

As I write this, it dawns on me how few such events – including those more enjoyable – he got to attend. Having chosen the military life, he missed out; yet there was a nastiness in the way he “teased” me for outings such as the chauffeured drive to the Athletic Club in the city, etc.. – arranged by his dad. Rather than (being) happy for me, he was jealous.

## PART 2

### Chapter 69: Westward Bound *(Make Plans, and God Laughs – A Jewish Proverb)*

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It was unclear how it came about – the orders to California. All those years, whenever change was afoot, I feared – against my pleas – he'd request shore duty back to good old New York, i.e., East Rockaway, Long Island. What I didn't realize was how embedded my husband was in what was referred to as Special Forces – the stuff movies are made of.

Little by little, guys from Norfolk were heading to California – Clare Hershey and wife, Jewel – who took me under her wing in the social functions of an Officer's Wife; Commander Kane, who lived on Officer's Row, but kept separate socially, etc...

I recall once being told by my ex how duty in California would be out of the question, as the government would not bear the expense of moving a large family such as ours. Yet, out of the blue, he walked in the door that day, papers in hand, saying we were heading to California.

I don't recall much of the moving process – the packing, the moving van, our final drive away Officer's Row. No Goodbye Parties, as most everyone had been transferred. There was, however, one disquieting situation.

Our oldest son requested (that) he stay behind to graduate with his friend – and, oh yes, his friend's parents were in agreement he could stay with them. I just couldn't bear the thought of us all not leaving together; the possibility that he would never join us in California. I looked to my husband for his support in this and he said not one damn word (*was he calculating one less mouth to feed?*).

There was just something in me about wanting to cut all ties connected to Norfolk – Manny and Jean, uppermost. The drinking, the obsessive need for money, the gung-ho zest for things furtive, clandestine, etc. So, I got my way, and our son joined us, and I regret denying him his wish.

Before Dallas/Fort Worth, there's little to remember. Because it was winter, we travelled below the snow line, missing much of middle America. I recall a walk through a site in Arizona where we saw a display of the flora and fauna of the area, especially the cactus. Then, the cultural shock of entering El Paso, Texas. It was as if we took a wrong turn and entered a Mexican town. I recall vibrant colors, music, exotic foods, Spanish speaking voices, etc. Strangely, all this would become commonplace in our upcoming life in Southern California.

It was Christmas time when we pulled into a Howard Johnsons in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. I assumed the plan was to spend the night, then move on. I know Christmas gifts had been opened and a long quiet day loomed ahead. Maybe I took notice of the absence of traffic on the busy circular highway leading in and out of Dallas, and from there came that

fateful utterance: why not pile in the car, drive into Dallas and follow President Kennedy's motorcade ride all the way to the Book Repository place where Oswald awaited. Perhaps I saw the historical significance in retracing those final moments of life.

Surprisingly, my husband shared my interest in this as well. Not so our sons, who elected to stay behind and play (with) their Christmas games and whatever (*Lucky them!*) Anyway, we drove up and down street after street – the only fools on the road – looking for any significant sign or marker denoting Kennedy having ever visited. Quite frankly, I think we were just lost and nowhere near the motorcade route. So, we turned and headed back to the motel – then going through hell before finally getting there!!!

There are many blanks in my memory and no way to verify events, but certain facts are imprinted in my memory. I always noted the circular highway, and this, I believe, is how we left Dallas – circling our way back to the hotel. And what I clearly recall is looking down and seeing the Howard Johnsons one last loop away. From then on, it was all a cacophonous nightmare.

First came the sound – the loud bursting power of an engine going at high speed. Then, the squeal of brakes as the car made hairpin turns around the loops, and the horror of knowing it was heading straight at us. We were in its path with no place to go. And as I uttered the words, “Oh, My God!”, came the impact.

I felt myself lifted up from the seat, my head hitting the car window. Then, eerie silence. Terrified of what I might see, I slowly turned to look in the back seat. When last I checked, my oldest was on the right side, holding the baby. But all I saw were the two older girls, but no baby.

“Where’s the baby?”, I shouted! Having no idea of the extent of the damage back there, I actually feared she’d been blown out of the window. Instead, she somehow bounced across to the other side, unharmed.

The I became aware of the smell – that unmistakable, heavy smell of gasoline. I imagined it pouring from both tanks, puddling under the car, ready to explode from the tiniest spark. Yet, in the grip of shock, I was still unable to move. My husband, who remained eerily silent, finally opened the door and exited the car.

I watched him, curious to see his reaction to whatever was out there, but his face revealed nothing. Then he slowly placed a cigarette between his lips, while reaching for his lighter, and I let out a bloody scream!

So, there he was, “the man”, the one pacing up and down as he read all those training manuals night after night; the one teaching survival training to those young adoring guys – and he was about to blow us all to smithereens.

What flashed through my mind was that time in Norfolk

and my first cocktail party and Aunt Jean in her pretty outfit looking forward to her first social evening. Then, “the man” bursting in, verbally assaulting me for not knowing what the hell I was doing – unmindful of his Aunt; then storming out. Then Jean so calmly saying, “He’s just nervous.”

Well, that didn’t fly with me then, and most certainly not in this instance. What I did know was there’d be consequences for that bloody scream.

I have no memory of leaving the car, or seeing the scene of the wreckage, or any interaction with my husband. *(Note: It’s possible, as I think back today, that those stretches of memory loss might be linked to my head hitting the glass.)*

What I next recall is being in the trooper’s car in the front seat, holding the baby – the girls in back – and all that artillery; rifles, etc., at the ready, floor to ceiling.

*(It crossed my mind what havoc exploding gas would cause in that car).* We were heading for the E.R. (Emergency Room).

I was standing next to the gurney, still holding the baby, looking down at my daughter, the front of her scalp wide open – the doctor irrigating the bloody matter away. Then there was nothing visible but pure white bone.

She was conscious, but heavily sedated. Then the nurse approached, apologizing for the intrusion. My oldest daughter, she said, was in a room down the hall. She needed a couple (of) small stitches in the back of the head but otherwise was unharmed. However, she was hysterical and would I come and try to calm her down.

As I headed down the hall, a memory surfaced of that daughter screaming in the back seat, claiming she'd gone blind – a temporary reaction, I was told, due to shock. So, I spoke to her, assuring her that she was fine, in safe hands, etc. But all the while, anxious to get back to the other daughter and that exposed white bone.

How much time passed is hard to say. It was back and forth between daughters, the baby getting

heavy in my arms, but utterly content. By now, my daughters scalp was closed up and nicely stitched – that white bone tucked away. Then, as if on cue, the door opened and my husband, at long last, entered.

It was too much to expect, of course, that he would approach, give me a hug and lift the weight of the baby from my arms. I'd been in that room for so long. I had no idea what tableau met his eyes, but it sent him in a rage. Instead of comfort, he hit me with a stinging verbal assault.

How could I just stand there, he demanded, with all this – his arms extending out to the bloody gurney, the blood-soaked gauzes littering the floor, etc. And, of course, his daughters wet hair and nicely stitched scalp as she lay on that gurney.

No doubt, his rage would have reached a crescendo if our other daughter's screams had then echoed down the hall. This was all about him. He saw me as totally unaffected.

Then, when I dared ask what took him so long to show up, he delivered a harangue about having to see to things back at the scene of the accident.

It's telling that I had no interest then, or in the future, of what transpired in the wake of our (the girls and I) departure from that gas-filled scene.

My question, though, must have triggered a morsel of guilt, sufficient enough to earn me a stinging rebuke: "All you cared about back there, was the baby, not the girls!"

I have no recollection of our finally exiting the Emergency Room, or how we got back to the motel. But I did follow the doctor's instructions and woke our daughter periodically during the night – a precaution following (a) head injury. My husband slept soundly.

I thought back over the years how he could never seem to leave his post in times of need. Yet, here, he was present but totally immersed in himself. A fact that would only grow with time.

## Chapter 70: San Diego

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Memories of Norfolk are so much clearer. During the Bay of Pigs and Soviet blockade, we wives banded together for moral support, concerned for the safety of our husbands, and how we were called upon to assist the women and children evacuated from Gitmo.

But the Vietnam War was of a different nature. Things took on a Rambo quality – my husband became immersed in things related to guerrilla warfare and clandestine operations. The word “Bamboo Curtain” surfaced. All of which he seemed to relish. I still picture him now, pacing back and forth in that Asian style kimono, reading those guerrilla manuals – the clink of those little bottles of rum stored in its flowing sleeves.

So, it shouldn't have been a surprise (but was) to learn that our own transfer to San Diego was prearranged – our arrival merely a link up to those already in place; and that first link up was with Claire Hershey.

After a couple of nights in a motel off the highway, we drove to an area close by in what seemed a newly developed area. Claire and Jewel had already purchased a home there and – in what also seemed pre-arranged, we stood with Claire in front of what was to become our new home.

It was directly across from a dairy farm – to the kids delight. As I stood there trying to grasp it all, I heard Claire exchange words with my husband relating to the accident. He was outraged that more money wasn't demanded, probably referring to that bit relating to the mental and emotional anguish often awarded to victims. I never asked about the settlement – actually didn't give a damn. Nor did I ask about how we were able to purchase that house in record time.

I felt little enthusiasm for the house or even being in California. Maybe I'd had watched too many Hollywood movies. When I mentioned this to morose feeling to the realtor, he told me

it was a common reaction from newcomers.

The one feature in the new kitchen that caught my eye was a dishwasher dash, my first ever labor-saving appliance. But when I loaded it up for the first time and eagerly turned it on, water started gushing out all over the floor.

Not to worry, my husband said. He would fix it , and I honestly believed him. He spent a long time down there on his knees, dismantling this and that. It dawned on me that I never actually saw him repair an appliance such as that. He wasn't exactly a handyman. After a while, he stood up and as he slowly closed the dishwasher, door – the sound of loosened parts clanging about – he announced that he couldn't fix it and I'd just go back to washing dishes as usual. When I dared suggest calling the realtor to send someone

over, there came that familiar flash of anger and a resounding “No, you won’t!” No doubt, he didn’t want anyone to see how he disemboweled that appliance.

As further proof that everything was now pre-arranged, my husband now took over Claire's previous position of Executive Officer, and Claire was now Commanding Officer of the group now officially called The Beach Jumper Unit. And Commander Kane, from Officer’s Row, was now, I believe, Captain Kane, and in overall command of that unit plus the Seals and UDT. The year was 1967 and the Vietnamese War was in full swing.

The house had three bedrooms, 2 hallways sand living room period. There was an outside patio and small, narrow backyard. I bought a rug for the living room and Jewel asked why I didn't get a wall-to-wall as it was cheaper in the long run.

throughout. I was always aware that budgeting was uppermost with six children – a fact that somehow with words and innuendo was somehow my fault. Two compensate, I learned to become frugal and was damn good at it. In looking at old pictures, the kids always looked well dressed (*in later years, when poverty hit, one son remarked how I still kept them well dressed*).

There were times when I was tempted to ask a wife, whose husband was of my husband's rank, how much she had to live on, but thought it was too intrusive. It just seemed that others had far better things, no matter the family size. It gnawed at me at times, but all those bounced checks in the past, told me not to delve too deeply in terms of salary. All that mattered was a steady income.

As in East Rockaway, I set out to befriend the neighbors as there would be need to depend on them

during the expected deployments.

The role of entertaining was fully in Jewel's court and I was never obliged to host a repeat of the one in Norfolk – which ignited hubby's full-blown tantrum.

But first it was all about settling in and exploring our surroundings – such memories now so hard to recall. I know we went to Tijuana, Mexico, (*the border, by the way, a short walk down the road from our home*), and certainly saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time. I do recall trying to plant a small garden and having it devoured by every variety of insects. And there the huge cactus (*two of them*) looking like Sentinels guarding the front windows (*labeled “phallic symbols” by my older son*).

And then, as what would become a symbol of all the shitty events awaiting in the near future, it was decided to plant fruit trees in that narrow backyard.

## Chapter 71: The Social Scene

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Overtime, I really didn't get to know the unit wives all that much. As the deployments increased, I more or less hunkered down and hobnobbed with the neighbors. Jewel was rather neurotic and it showed when she arranged a get together with the wives. She'd greet us at the door, looking haggard, maybe wearing scuffed slippers – a sign of how hard she worked. And it always showed in the lovely table settings and prepared refreshments awaiting us.

Once, we wives were asked to work on the layettes that were given to the young wives and new mothers of lowly paid seamen. All the pieces were of a thin white material, and as I sewed a hem on a little nightgown, I thought how much nicer if the pieces were better made and a more cheerful color. (*it brought to mind what my*

*young husband once told me; as a young seaman himself, he was warned if he was meant to have a new wife, one would have come in his seabag).*

Jewel, though, didn't go out of her way to show me the ropes as the executive officer's wife – the role she had in Norfolk. It was mainly relaying info. She was always nice to me, but not the sort I would pop in for a chat – at least not on a regular basis. I once had occasion to meet her mother who was visiting. It got a little heady when Jewel admitted to having attempted suicide. When I looked to her mother for verification, she nodded yes. (*Actually, it was more than once*).

I should mention that it wasn't that long after our arrival that we all experienced what would become an ongoing event: an earthquake. I'd been chatting on the phone with my young next-door neighbor when the earth began to move under my feet. Like an

old hand, she gently talked me through it. *(Note: many years later, while living in Oregon, I felt that familiar jolt. The yard immediately filled with terrified tenants, and I was there to explain the all-too-familiar – even deducing that it was a mere 4 point on the Richter Scale).*

Back in San Diego, I recall when we four – Clare, Jewel, my husband and I were returning from yet another cocktail party, Jewel suddenly announced that she just had to get out and walk a bit – that she couldn't breathe. So, Clare stopped and let her out; cruising along beside her as she weaved her way in the dark.

My husband, of course, was fuming. His drunken antics, such behavior in a woman was disgusting. At least, I didn't get a "Don't you dare!" lecture. He constantly complained, though, of having to tolerate Clare and the other Officers in the unit. But it was all a smoke screen. He relished his

status as a ranking Officer – and a step away from being Commanding Officer.

On one occasion, I drove with my husband along the soon-to-be dreaded Silver Strand, heading to Coronado. It was a scenic road with the ocean on either side, and the majestic Hotel del Coronado looming in the distance.

As we entered the Naval Base, we pulled up in front of a building that marked the headquarters of the Beach Jumper Unit. I recall chairs grouped around a table and Clare there to greet us. Obviously, it was pre-arranged as a young sailor showed up bearing a tray holding a coffee decanter (*standard heavy metal used by the military*) and tray of cookies.

I was both startled and honored as it was most surely arranged by Clare in honor of his Executive Officer's wife.

My husband surely knew what awaited me and it was as if he went out of his way to sabotage it. He engaged in non-stop chat with Clare, ignoring me. As I sipped awful coffee and bit into a cookie, Clare kept glancing my way, aware of it all, and it wasn't until a similar situation in the future that he finally spoke up.

I harkened back to that long ago when he (*husband*), got that Officer's stripe and informed me that coffee in my honor pissed him off. Although I never truly found Clare (*or Jewel*) all that likeable, I was truly grateful for what he did. It was to be my first and last visit to the Beach Jumper's Unit headquarters.

*(Note: Young Officer's wives, I learned, would often visit husbandts who had the duty. They'd arrive laden with food and enjoy time together... and lightening didn't strike that inner sanctum!!)*

I recall Jewel and I heading to Coronado now and then to attend a gathering of wives hosted by Mrs. Kane. I'd never met her when she and then Commander Kane lived on Officer's Row in Norfolk. But, she was a very sweet and older woman (*their young son was serving in Vietnam and was wounded there*).

Sometimes, we wives met at the Coronado Officer's Club. These get-togethers were to boost morale as our husbands were so often deployed to Vietnam. At one gathering, we discovered we were selected to model an array of fur coats and jackets.

I was not happy about that as it required mincing across the elevated stage in front of a crowd of mostly uniformed men – prospective buyers. Also, I was chosen to wear a black fur jacket and I look awful in black.

Our next gathering was in a different room. At one point, I left to visit the ladies room, which took me past the room with the elevated stage. As the door was ajar, I peeked in and encountered an amazing scene:

The room was packed with uniformed Officer's, all eyes focused on that elevated stage. An what I saw prancing back and forth was a group of fetching young ladies in the most revealing nightwear – negligees and teddys – so sheer on could see the dark nipples and pubic hair on each and every body – quite a departure from our fur offerings. Surely, these gals were bussed in from Vegas!

I never mentioned what I saw – in part because I risked laughter at my naivete – unaware, possibly, that it was standard stuff (*“when I'm deployed, stay away from the Officer's pool!”*)

*(Note: My times at the Officer's*

267-a

*Club would come into play later on in my encounters with a Catholic priest I sought out for spiritual succor.)*

Mostly though, I got to know the neighbors – one in particular, Sharon, a chief's wife, was the one who truly stuck with me. We shopped together at the commissary, took our pets to the vet, hauled kids places, took in movies at the Navy base, etc, etc... In between, though, there were others less boisterous than Sharon, who had no qualms about sending their husbands over to repair a leak, check faulty wiring, etc. – Just as all the times before during my husband's absences.

It should be noted that my husband – as in Norfolk – was not as socially connected with the neighbors. It mattered not that they were so helpful – he preferred aloneness behind closed doors. Where the dark side is safely hidden from view and played exclusively for family.

## Chapter 72: The Silver Strand

267-b

The at-home cocktail parties – such as I gave in Virginia – were not so much anymore. Everything seemed centered around the Officer’s Club – especially the cocktail parties.

Aside from my husband’s false claims that he saw enough of those guys at work, etc., it was as if the unit couldn’t see enough of each other. Hence, the cocktail bashes. In fact, we seldom went anywhere as a couple, and I most certainly would have preferred a more pleasant outing.

Of course, I could have stayed home and sent him on his way – fueling an anxiety-ridden vigil as I awaited his drunken return. Somehow, my being there allowed me to witness first hand, rather than at home not knowing.

Before heading out the door, the same conversation always played out. I assume I wore an appropriate outfit, given in all our years together, he never gave notice (“*You’re pretty in the kitchen, wearing an apron.*”) Nonetheless, as he itched to get going, I – with those oft-mentioned “high hopes” – elicited that time-worn promise from him that he would at least spend part of the evening with me. And he, true to the script, dutifully promised.

As I recall, there were no chairs, just folds milling around. Drinks were served from the bar, I assume. But little in the way of refreshments. It was – at least at first – a meet and greet. Some of the wives I knew – my age; and then; the “newbies” - the fresh young nervous faces of the Annapolis graduate’s wives.

It usually took a while – timed for when I was engaged in conversation. One minute he was by my side; the next, he was gone. And there he was, hunched over the other guys at the bar, the scene reminding me somewhat of seals hugging a rock.

Maybe it was too much this time. I was pissed and in no mood for the young Annapolis wife who approached, asking with dismay, why there were no soft drinks being served.

No doubt she approached me, an older and wiser sort, who would respond as such: I would march to the bar, elbow my way through the colony of seals and demand a soft drink for my young friend. But I didn't. Maybe I knew the next time I saw her, she would – like the other young ones, be holding a glass of wine. In truth, my mind was focused on the long, god-awful drunken drive home on the Silver Strand.

I hadn't spoken to him since he left my side, and now it was closing time. Throughout, those guys kept drinking, and now the well went dry. As my husband staggered, glassy eyed in my direction, I fought to banish those familiar feelings of disgust and revulsion, after all, it was showtime, and, as numerous times before, he was driving me home.

Mostly, the wives drove. In one instance, as she started the engine, hubby bid a final goodbye and staggered to the waiting vehicle. Fumbling with the passenger door, he maneuvered his way in the seat. However, as the car moved forward, the guy had second thought about leaving and started to exit the car. In an instant, her arm shot out, she grabbed him by the collar and reeled him back inside—all this to the cheers of his drinking buddies. If this had been an exclusive gathering of SEAL team

members, the parking lot would have been filled with the sounds of mini explosives planted in each other's cars.

And so, it was time for our dance macabre – automotive style – as my husband took the wheel, and we began the arduous journey along the Silver Strand. Per usual, the radio was turned on at peak volume to keep him awake, then I'd train my eyes on the center divider, lest we drifted off course. Of most concern, though, was watching his head drift downward, rendering him asleep at the wheel.

I so often suspected that he played games with me, pretending different scenarios, such as being in a deep sleep, holding his breath as in death, etc. And so it was on that ride home: did he train a glassy eye on me now and then to enjoy the fear he generated? How else to explain his sudden awakenings.

Hopefully, the kids would be asleep behind closed doors when we – not so quietly – returned home. After a guy’s night of heavy drinking, he’d either collapse – fully clothed – on the bed and be immediately asleep, or, taking time to undress, enter that same alcohol-fueled slumber.

Note: If only the drunken spree would quietly end as it did for my friend Sharion: Aware of his drunken state, her husband, Jim, would call from his watering hole and Sharon would walk those several blocks to retrieve both he and the car (*he’d once gotten stopped for driving under the influence*). Then, as Sharon so blightly put it, she’d tuck husband Jim in for the night and be free till morning... If only for me!!!

The episodes began many years before, when the children were young and (*hopefully*) oblivious. I hinted as such in previous journal entries,

but couldn't bring myself to go into detail. Even now, I chance that the reader will skim over his drunken actions but feel disgust over my lack of action.

It began way back in East Rockaway, when we settled into our first home on Yarmouth Road. That's when the gun became an ever-present fixture in our life. Again, that one, I believe, was retrieved from his dad's workshop (*As a lowly "sailor", it surely didn't come in his sea bag!*).

Of course, now in my twilight years, I can – as in the words of a song – “see clearly now” that he was severely paranoid. As for me, I went with the flow – having been programmed early on by a crazy, drunken mother.

My first recollection stems from a visit with the next-door neighbors – the only ones he bothered to acknowledge on Yarmouth (*I think*)

Road. Long ago names of people, places, etc., escape me in these twilight years.

In retrospect, it's amazing how quickly alcohol seemed to soak his brain. Everything seemed normal as we bid goodbye – the last beer consumed, and (we) headed next door. Did he stagger a bit as he headed to the bathroom to pee? Was I already in bed when he returned and undressed? Whatever he signaled, I expressed no interest in the sex he now drunkenly demanded; and that's when he reached under his pillow for the gun (*where did that come from?*) and held it to his temple. Even now, I picture him naked, pacing back and forth, gun poised to shoot (*was it even loaded*). Would he actually pull the trigger? If not stopped, would my mother have actually driven off the pier? Recalling what my brother and I endured, I feared the same for my children. So, under the gun, I was forced to endure unwanted sex, except in theory, there was no sex!!

To be crude, drunks – without help – have a problem “getting it up”. As he lay atop me, his weight pressing harder on my 90-pound body, it was difficult to breathe. Then he’d fall asleep but come quickly awake when I attempted to slide out from under.

Then, after a long, long period of mounting despair (*death at such times would have been welcome*), I finally heard the sound of steady breathing and intermittent snoring. Slowly scooting out from under him, I quietly made my way to the living room and the welcome comfort of the sofa. I should mention that as I freed myself, there was a sudden movement as he turned over and commenced to snore.

Previously, I spoke of “sudden awakenings” – the game playing. No sooner was I settled on the sofa, when he stood looming over me, loudly demanding that I get the hell back in bed. The night, obviously, was not yet over. Fearing he’d frighten the children,

I dutifully followed him back to bed. Was it rape? I neither fought or consented. Later, when he was finally asleep, I went to use the bathroom and there were puddles of his urine flooding the counter and dripping down the floor.

Such episodes were like a recurring Groundhog Day: The morning after, he'd appear dressed and bleary-eyed – his head, no doubt, pounding. There was (and never would be) any mention of the previous night's mayhem. I could have wailed and carried on about his actions but chose to abide by my mother-in-law's sacred litany: "Peace at any price". In retrospect, just because someone expounds words sounding all-knowing and wise, they are, so often, a bunch of bullshit. How did she tolerate those Friday calls from the mistress? Yet, overlooked them, due to his generous financial support. Lost when he died without life insurance.

## Chapter 73: The Great Santini

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The marriage wasn't all about the bedroom scene – which I chose not to again mention in detail. When not provoked, he had, at first, a marvelous personality – rather endearing, in fact. Unfortunately, I chose to ignore those warning signs: after all, we were young and he was a bit rough around the edges, etc.

I'm not sure if the Great Santini was real or fiction. He was first portrayed in a book, then, in a movie. He was a tough, hard drinking Marine whose actions verged on madness when fueled by drink. A friend from school recently surprised me with a revelation regarding her late husband – A former Marine. They, too, had six children and actually shared their Catholic beliefs. He was also a good provider, and a hands-on dad, and – according to my friend, never let a day end without expressing his love for her.

She once hinted about his temper if ever it was revealed that one adult son was gay – a revelation she insisted be kept from her husband, given his utmost distaste for that lifestyle. What she feared was her ex-Marine’s temper, which, when provoked, had actually cost him a couple (of) jobs. I thought she was joking when she spoke of “heading for the hills” if the truth came out. *(Note: In the end, maybe her husband’s poor health softened him – or that son’s financial success and generosity to them also softened the blow when the truth was revealed).*

The Great Santini, though, stayed true to his nature. Drink turned him into an unstoppable fighting machine. As the children watched – both frightened and enthralled – by his destructive antics, they were also in awe of their mother’s seeming courage in facing him head on. They gave no thought that she could be reaching a breaking point. After all, she was strong!!

In San Diego, California, the drinking progressed. Once, I received a call from someone I didn't know. She thought I should know that my husband was drinking with hers, and that he actually crawled out to his car and drove off. And, in that state, he was now cruising along the Silver Strand – my “hell road”!!

In a state of panic, I called our Marine Pilot neighbor and explained the circumstances. “My god, he crawled to the car!”, I cried. As expected, he was out the door and, on his way, to intercept a fellow fighting man – all for one, one for all.

The kids, the teenagers, would have listened in, and when dad's car came to a screeching halt, in the driveway, would come the sound of bedroom doors slamming shut. Surely, mom will handle this!

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Anyway, the older boys would eventually begin to jokingly refer to their dad as “The Great Santini”.

When the kids were young, I didn’t much focus on their reaction to things. Yet, my brother, 5 years younger, was aware but quite content to follow his older sister’s lead. I always felt it was my duty to protect him. With six siblings, though, it was hoped they’d sort of protect each other – safety in numbers, so to speak.

In time, though, there was no protection against the raw reality of a dad’s drunken antics. Scenes played out and the older ones were now inserting themselves in the melee. So, dad drank too much: but my role was to stay strong and keep the marriage intact – if only to appear as a nice snug family.

## Chapter 74: The Suicide

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As I recall, my husband came home early one day – his face showing a gambit of emotions. Shock, bewilderment, etc. As he described it, one of “the guys” who’d recently returned from deployment, just walked into the unit without a word to anyone. He then sat behind his desk, opened a drawer, removed a gun and blew his brains out.

It must have been a horrible scene. Yet, he never referred to the poor guy by name or showed any grief over the loss of a fellow Officer. What he displayed was shock over what he’d witnessed – the rawness of it. Rather telling, considering he’d been performing a similar routine for years: the drunken dance around the bedroom, gun leveled at his head. This guy, though, took it to the max. But there were to be repercussions.

What followed was a strange silence. No calls from the senior wives detailing ways we would reach out – especially since it was still not known which wife amongst us was a grieving widow.

The answer came when my husband approached me with a startling announcement: from now on, all you wives are strictly forbidden to make any contact with “that guy’s” wife – stay the hell away from her. It was a clarion call to one and all – and lo to the wife who broke that code of silence.

Much too soon after that, I happened to be at the Naval Base Post Office when I spotted a familiar face across the room. She was one of the regulars who attended our periodic gatherings, though I didn’t know her that well.

She, however, certainly knew me. When we made eye contact, I was prepared for a friendly wave and smile.

Instead, her face turned dark, eyes wild. Then, as from the depth of her soul, came her agonizing words: “They killed my husband – all of them. They’re responsible!”

I stood there, unable to move – the thought, “Oh, God, Why me!!”. If only, though, I could have crossed that room and given her the comforting hug she so richly deserved. No words would have been needed. Just letting her know someone cared.

Instead, I lacked the guts to break that code of silence. Not just regarding my husband’s wrath, but maybe stirring up a hornet’s nest throughout the whole command.

I recall there was once a story on TV starring Carol Burnett in a dramatic departure from her usual comedy. She was a widow probing the unexplained death of her military loved one. It was the first time I learned, in depth, the origin of that twisted term, “Friendly Fire”. *...just thinking, is all.*

## Chapter 75: Maine Lobsters

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Back in Norfolk, the young officers would often pop in. That it was tolerated made me wonder if that possessive streak targeted only civilian types, such as the milkman, insurance man, etc.

One young man was the son of a butcher, and I once mentioned my difficulty in knowing cuts of beef. On his next visit, he brought me a colorful poster depicting a side of beef, each cut identified as to the most tender and on down. It hung on the pantry door until it got lost in the move to California.

That young man, though, eventually showed up in California – no longer in the service. He was now what I believe was called a civilian contractor and working deals with the military – specifically my husband's unit.

Surprisingly, I was invited along to join he and my husband in what I could only call a bit of “night crawling”,

Maybe that was how business was conducted, but I was not comfortable sitting in a dim nightclub watching a gal – naked from the waist up – swimming underwater in a tank.

My husband, as usual, did the talking, ignoring me. It was only later that I came to believe it was the young man who wanted me to come along, and my husband had to comply. Well, he did me no favor. I also found him a bit aloof, far removed from the cheerful sort I once knew.

It was not too long after “the butcher's son” had returned home that I received a rather strange delivery. It was rather heavy with warning stickers about special handling etcetera.

As the kids gathered around, I carefully. Open the box and lift it out. A container filled with honest to goodness main lobsters swimming in seawater.

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My young friend had not forgot(ten) me or my roots after all. I was extremely touched.

Then I discredited myself in the eyes of my children: wanting to show how we Islanders did things, I prepared a deep pot of boiling salted water, dumped the lobsters and quickly close the lid.

It was then that the kids began to howl as they heard the critters banging against the lid trying to get out. It didn't help that they had been playing with them on the floor, watching the spindly creatures move about – enchanted by them.

Plagued with guilt, I realized that my children were far removed from the lifestyle of growing up on an island. Caught fish were left to thrash around, etcetera. For my part, I vowed never to cook a live lobster again – hoping of course, none ever again arrived on my doorstep.

In some respects, my husband was developing his dad's persona, the one he pretended – in my view – to despise. When I raved over the lobster gift, he downplayed it; claimed it was nothing personal. It was just a payback for a lucrative deal he sent the guy – military procurements, I think is the term.

Anyway, this new attitude brought memories of the time I was living with my in-laws in East Rockaway. It was my first Christmas there and first glimpse of the workings of the business world. Trucks started arriving; delivering gifts galore: champagne, fancy beers, baskets of fruit and imported cheeses. I just found it all very exciting – even though Meem was much used to it by now.

When Dad came home, though, he poured ice on my excitement. It was merely business dash, nothing more.

For every case shipment of goods delivered to the East Rockaway home, dad's company acted in kind. It was his same reaction when I marveled over those linen suits his business partner's wife sent after my first born. It's all business – means nothing! (*She being the one touting the merits of fur coats versus cloth ones to me*).

Quite frankly, I found this new attitude a bit over the top. The lobsters were a personal gift to me. Yet, given all those medals and awards he managed to achieve, he begrudged me that one bit of recognition. Nonetheless, things were going too far downhill for the son to latch onto Daddy's coattails. He just lacked the right stuff.

## Chapter 76: Don't Threaten My Career!

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One outstanding difference between father and son, is that my father-in-law was not a drinking man – one who over indulged. What he was in his youth, is unknown, but I doubt he could have accomplished what he did without his eye on the ball, so to speak, especially since he was only 54 when he died.

My husband, on the other hand, was not ambitious – content to stay a sailor...until, that is, he was offered a Commission – and so began whatever it was that led to whatever it became.

The drinking was now in full swing, and view of all, but confined behind closed doors. In one episode, he came staggering down the hall in undershorts, fly wide open. A daughter, mind you, then told him to zip it up. To this day I hate boxer shorts.

Once, in a drunken stupor, he fell face down on the floor. Somehow, he got to his feet, and I saw blood forming on his lip. Thankfully, he was too drunk for any “amorous” moves. The next morning, he appeared, glassy-eyed and with a much-swollen lip.

Instead of looking a might sheepish, he angrily asked why I didn't get him medical help. I was reminded of one of my mother's drunken falls; her moans and her turning up the volume of the twangy country-western station to no avail. The next morning there she was berating me for not helping when she was “so sick”.

By now I had resigned myself to accepting what couldn't be changed— he was who he was. And I was programmed from an early age to carry on as usual. I just knew I'd know when the limit had been reached.

I recall Clare once stating that given all the good my husband did for the unit, he deserved to kick back at home with a few drinks.

After the swollen lip episode, Clare jokingly described how that “good guy” had stormed into the unit, hung-over, demanding that every window be opened wide. Of course, everyone chuckled over the boss’s overindulgence – the swollen lip frosting on the cake.

This time I felt obliged to share with Clare how that evening wasn't fun and game for me. Turning serious, he told me if things ever became too much for me to handle, I was to give him a call and he'd come right over.

Thinking to use his offer as a sort of warning if my husband thought to overindulge, I opened a Pandora's box. “Don't you dare!”, he bellowed! “Don't even think about calling my boss.”

For the first time, I heard fear in his voice – fear over the possibility that my making such a call to Clare would ruin his “career”; that we’d end up without a roof over our heads, etc.

Short of saying that he had a drinking problem, I sensed his awareness of it. Clare only witnessed the hangovers. A call from me, and Clare would see the show in all its glory – the kids lurking behind closed doors, etc.

I honestly expected he wouldn't tolerate my calling Clare. But what intrigued me or, better yet, made me suppress a laugh – was his reference to suddenly having a “career”.

Nonetheless, I didn't care much for Clare to give him access to the drunken dramas – and truths of the loaded gun...or was it?

*(Note: It wasn't until Al Anon that I finally felt free to open up.)*

## Chapter 77: The Allotment

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Often, when I'd be at one of those gatherings of wives, I'd wonder how many received allotments from husbands – monthly checks, come rain or shine, automatically dispatched in the mailbox per agreement between husbands and paymasters.

In times of war, especially, how else could husbands and fathers be assured their dependents were financially secure – bills were paid, food was on the table, etc.

As the war went on, the deployments increased. With the marriage crumbling, it was a time out from all the friction. For the life of me now, I can't recall how the money arrived – except it was not by allotment. And always, it seemed, when less came, I'd receive a call from Clare saying my husband volunteered to extend his deployment.

Thankfully, it was my connection to the neighbors that helped in time of need.

One, in particular – Sharon, was most helpful. I often borrowed money from her when “the check” was late. Then, pay it back – then reborrow. Her husband was military, so all was simpatico.

One day, though, I had reached some limit of endurance: along with health problems, dealing with teenagers (*a whole new ballgame*) and questioning my husband’s ongoing explanation of his inability to provide an allotment, I made a decision:

I got dressed and took that familiar walk to the Ream Field Base. This time, though, I headed for a specifically marked building; took a number and waited to be called. I then sat across from a young Officer, a member, I believe, of a group call JAG’s – lawyers assigned to assist military dependents in legal matters.

And so I poured out my frustration in never having a dependable flow of when my husband was deployed.

Why officers don't have the same options as enlisted to provide for dependents, etc. As I let it all out, though, the young man began to roll his eyes and shake his head.

Instead of offering some sort of sympathetic response, he marveled at what a naïve young woman I was for falling for such crap, i.e. (my husband's lying words). Well, I didn't go there to be insulted, so made a quick, tear-eyed exit. Nonetheless, I did get the answer I sought: my husband was a damn liar.

However, if I had ignored the young JAG's insulting manner and asked if I had legal recourse, it would have opened a can of worms – another threat to his career.

There's an expression about "seeing the writing on the walls". I wasn't naïve (*well, most of the time*), just adhering to the lopsided version of "Peace at any Price".

## Chapter 78: Jekyll / Hyde and other Cumbersomes

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In San Diego, I was never obliged to host any more ill-fated cocktail parties. I did though, have neighbors in and out – mostly during those lengthy deployments. As mentioned, my husband was just not the neighborly kind.

There was one occasion, though, when he happened to be around when some neighbors popped in – people I knew well and who were regular visitors. In truth, he could be quite charming and was so that evening. As I picture the scene as it unfolded, my husband was perched on the counter, bottle of rum at hand, then, out of the blue, he suddenly announced – as if in surprise – that he'd just downed several drinks yet remained “perfectly sober”.

Well, that got my attention, but I was somewhat relieved when following his dubious declaration, the neighbors decided to head home.

He'd come down from his perch on the counter, mouthed some departing pleasantries and then turned in my direction.

His whole continence suddenly changed into one of unbridled hate – the suddenness of it causing me to step back.

“Whenever there are people around”, he snarled, “You act like some god damn Queen!”

I just stood there as he turned abruptly and staggered his way to the bedroom.

Often, how I wished he would act like most drunks – the kind that manage to make it to the bed, then collapse into a drunken stupor that will render him incapable of motion until the harsh light of day – and the inevitable hangover.

Rather than one who is fueled by drink, able to while away the night engaged in senseless games, bordering on cruelty – gun at the ready.

Meanwhile, the stress and strains of the marriage kept piling up. Note: *Anyone reading all this might wonder about those few and far between happy times. Well, the bad times erased them all.*

I can recall exactly when it all began – the tremors. Even today, there lurks the fear that mere mention of the name will generate its return. I'm reminded of a celebrity – a fellow sufferer who voiced a similar concern. However, because of its profound effect on my quality of life back then, it must be recorded:

A friend/neighbor had driven me to the small post office in nearby Nestor. As she waited in the car, I went in to handle some routine paperwork – of which I have no memory. However, when my signature was required is when that very first tremor took hold – a wild shaking that gripped my fingers, leaving nothing but a swirly line in its wake.

From then on, every signature was a dreaded ordeal.

I recall a time when a daughter going, through teen-age angst, insist I take her to the dispensary. The thought of having to sign her in and the corpsman watching in puzzlement as my fingers did a wild St. Vitus' Dance was too much. Somehow, I talked her out of it.

How long I had to cope with that god-awful business is unknown. As I've been able to block most of it from my mind, all I know is that the tremor left with the same swiftness it appeared.

*Note: Many years later I came across a Dear Abby column in which the writer described my exact same condition. It was unbelievable that a fellow human relieved me of the stress of feeling like a freak: It's the bodies psychosomatic response to things causing mental or emotional stress.*

As often mentioned, I stayed true to his wish that I never take part in homecomings – whether it be the wild shrieks of loved ones as the ship pulled into port, or even a small subdued gathering as a plane brought in a loved one.

My young neighbors, especially the wife, were astounded as this one deployment kept getting extended (*at his request, of course*). But when his return became imminent they came over with celebratory wine – the wife maybe imagining it all playing out like a romance novel. No doubt she was crushed when I explained that long-standing agreement... and then, Clare called:

To my surprise, he said he'd be heading out to the airport to pick up my long absent husband and did I want to come along. Well, that was unexpected; but maybe a gesture to compensate for that extended deployment.

Thanking him for the offer, I then explained our (*or rather, my husband's*) pact on homecomings and hung up. Well, that was not the script my young neighbor envisioned, and, as she rattled on, I then had second thoughts on my willingness to kowtow to his twisted set of rules.

So, I called Clare back and said I had a change of heart and would accept his offer. But as we drove about that too-familiar stretch of the Silver Strand, feelings of dread began creeping along my spine.

So, we stood there at the airport scanning the arrivals, and as one broke from the crowd and headed our way. I had to contain myself: One look at that Poncho Villa type mustache dancing like a fur ball on his upper lip, and I just wanted to laugh like hell.

But then I saw that dark look bore into me and knew it was going to be a bumpy ride.

There was no welcoming hug; instead, he turned to Clare and launched that familiar shop-talk routine. Clare, however, interrupted him mid-sentence and declared – angrily, I might add, there was plenty of time to talk tomorrow. “Go talk to your wife.” he ordered.

To have that perpetual show of importance deflated in the presence of his wife, must have stung. Yet, it gave me no satisfaction, as he would surely exact revenge.

Seeing that mustache, though, left me with a multitude of thoughts swirling in my head: was the “stache” an ongoing ritual whenever he deployed? Was it related to undercover work, or most likely, his freedom to morph into someone else? Instead of a married guy saddled with a wife and kids, he could be somebody. And with a fat wallet to boost the charade!!!

## Chapter 79: The Final Deployment

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As I age, my vision and memory become less reliable, so there's a need to move things along. Recently, my oldest son and his wife came for a short visit – such usually in tandem with some emergency or other regarding her mother who also lived in Oregon (*You could say such times were my only opportunity to see my son*).

Over the years, I never much talked of the things spelled out in all these pages. (*Best to leave sleeping dogs, etc*). But something drove the conversation in that direction and our shared memory of one drunken episode:

The kids were older now and there was no way to hide the “Great Santini’s” antics. As my daughter-in-law reacted in shock, my son and I described my naked husband sprawled on the bed, bellowing that he had to pee. My hurry to fetch a bucket lest the mattress be destroyed, my son, standing beside me

- while husband and father laughed with drunken glee.

What I didn't mention was how it spurred a long ago memory of my young brother and I standing over our mother as she lay in a heap on the bedroom floor – moaning in drunken splendor. Strangely, such episodes only happened when our father worked the night shift, ensuring our availability as a captive audience.

*Note: My husband never shied away from putting on a “good show”, either.*

By now, our marriage was in a shambles, and peace only came when he deployed – which presented a paradox: That such peace came with a price tag; the cost being my inability to depend on a regular flow of money from him.

Looking back, of all I've written up to this point, I could never have imagined that the worst was yet to come.

It's impossible to record the end of a marriage in orderly fashion. I just know that there was no communication in this – the last deployment – nor do I recall much of any during the others. So much is a blank in memory. In any case, why not – as the saying goes – just skip to the chase.

The money that was coming in drips and drabs just stopped, and I began to quietly reach out to trusted neighbors – first to explain my circumstances and then ask for a loan to tide me over.

It was understood, of course, that there was a war going on and my husband was probably out in the field, or whatever. But it reached a point where I was forced to call Clare and seek his help. He then assured me he'd send out a telegram to my husband and get him to move on this matter.

So, I waited and then checked back with Clare – though thought it strange that he didn't give me that courtesy. All he offered was to send off another telegram – his off-hand attitude adding to my distress.

By now, I had stopped paying the mortgage and any bills I could get away with. So, in desperation, I again called Clare and his response made my head spin: It was just not good policy to send any more telegrams lest the Viet Cong intercept them. Wouldn't look good, you see, for the enemy to learn of unfavorable conduct regarding a US Naval Officer.

Surely Clare must know where in the hell my husband was located. Was he roaming incognito in some rice paddy, twirling his Pancho Villa mustache?

By now, I was going to the neighbors asking if they could put

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together what food they could spare that I could turn into a meal for the kids.

Anger was building up inside me and it reached the breaking point when Clare called with an astounding message: The guys in the unit wanted to know if it was okay with me if they took up a collection to help with my expenses.

Everyone knew what was going on. The fact that none of the wives called to check on me brought to mind the time one of the team blew his brains out; how we wives were warned to stay the hell away from the widow.

My husband wasn't performing heroic deeds out there, in terms of following orders. He was playing macho man, and getting away with it. I, on the other hand, became invisible.

Then came a late night call from Clare saying in that insufferable bland voice that “my guy” was back. However, it was probably best he stay awhile with he and Jewel “til he sobered up a bit”.

However, I had to fight the urger to say something to the effect that he could stay right there; that I sure as hell wasn’t putting out a welcome mat, etc. But given the long stretch of time I had to prepare for this “homecoming”, I was willing to let things play out.

It must have been very late at night – no welcoming voices to herald the return of The Great Santini.

He was a bloated mess. His bloodshot eyes barely able to focus. I couldn’t help but notice, though, that his body didn’t show the ravages of hunger – he was getting his three meals a day without begging door-to-door.

All I had to do was suffer through the night. Thankfully, though he did make a half-hearted sexual advance (*unbelievable!!*), he was soon in the throes of drunken slumber.

In the morning, quite early, no words were exchanged as I waited for him to dress and head out for that anticipated chorus of cheers from his fellow Beach Jumpers. But before he could make his exit, I finally spoke:

I had long prepared the words I was about to say and with the utmost surety, informed him that I didn't want him to return; that he would have to find someplace else to live.

I expected a gamut of responses – shock, anger, etc. But surely not one of absolute defiance: “You and your round-eyed kids can't hold a candle to those marvelous slant eyes!” I was stunned!

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It was as if he, too, had prepared words in advance – his with the sure aim of the club that had long ago rendered that pet store rabbit dead.

AND IT HAD ONLY JUST BEGUN!!

## Chapter 80: Friends No More

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It was all pre-arranged – I had the name of a lawyer someone recommended in advance of the homecoming – the last deployment.

I recall the elevator ride as it went higher and higher; then entering that spacious office overlooking the beautiful San Diego Bay. Actually, my first words as I numbly looked beyond the lawyer at his desk, was to remark on that view.

It was all business – no friendly smile – as I took a seat and detailed, at his request, my purpose for being there. It's amazing how quickly and precisely I was able to condense a long-troubled marriage and the events leading up to where I now sat, while fixated on that view.

More amazing, was how little impact my account generated – he heard it all and far more.

My purpose was to file for a legal separation – a means to guarantee some sense of peace in my life – especially at night. I’m sure I must have spoken of the drunken scenes, etc., but held back on the forced sex routines. I just couldn’t bring myself to hang that word on him – even when dealing with the (*exasperating!*) adoring words of the young priest who later fell under my husband’s spell.

As the attorney put it, a legal separation is much like what the children and I adjusted to throughout the years of deployments. Well, that’s not the way the children, or world at charge (sp? *-large*), will come to view it.

Then, in that same matter-of-fact tone, the attorney asked how I planned to pay for today’s appointment. Matching his tone, I replied I was using the mortgage money.

*Note: It was either he or another attorney who pointed to a file cabinet claiming it contained records of Officers as high as Admirals who refused to release pay records. The relationship between higher-ups and paymasters almost SACROSANCT!*

Nonetheless, papers would be drawn up, including a restraining order and delivered to the BOQ (Bachelors Officers Quarters) at Coronado.

But before the “friends” of this entry, there came the task of informing the children of my decision to get a separation. Other than the two youngest, I was met with a barrage of negativity from the older ones.

Now they were just like the other kids at school from “broken homes”. Why didn’t I leave him when they were too young to notice, etc., etc. It was as if The Great Santini was Pa Walton, Daddy Knows Best, etc. All rolled into one.

The next day, as tempers cooled, came another barrage – this from the injured party at the BOQ.

“How dare you send me a restraining order!!” “Since when do I have to be restrained!!”, etc. So much for sparing him the rape label.

Then, to really shake things up, he threatened to disclose my instability to a Judge that would render me an unfit mother: The post-partum episode following the birth of my fifth child way back in good old East Rockaway. (*Is that what all the guerilla training manuals wrought – a sugar-free coke without the fizz?*)

One neighbor I enjoyed was Sue J., though she wasn't even in the neighborhood. Her house was on another street, but our fences connected. One day she decided to cut through a slot for easy removal – supposedly so our rabbits could visit. Then my young neighbor, right next door, followed suit – but she didn't have a rabbit.

*(The fact that neither asked me if this was okay, attests to my better nature).*

It didn't take too long for my visit to the attorney to flood the neighborhood – no doubt through the words of aggrieved children. As already mentioned, I'd come to rely on both husbands and wives throughout the years to assist during deployments – without ever giving cause to question my trust. And so I called the gal I knew to ask if her husband could spare me a few minutes to probably lift some objects or other. “Sorry,” she primly replied, “he will no longer be available to you, but I'll be glad to come and lend a hand.”

On another day, I heard a hammering in the back yard and saw that slat in the fence on Sue's side was now nailed shut. I thought of fun times we had together – our trips to

to Tijuana, where Sue – who spoke Spanish – would take us to the side streets where the locals shopped and goods were cheaper.

Maybe the fact that Sue was once divorced with two children and now snug with a new husband devoted to both her and the children caused this action. She now perceived me as a threat.

*Note: In today's world where the focus appears to be on women's solidarity – fights for equal pay, equal rights, etc., I wonder if that extends to neighborhoods in Little America – If a neighbor's marriage comes to an end, leaving the wife on her own, do the other wives rush to console her or put a tight hold on their husbands?*

I was no threat in that regard, but maybe it had to do with not trusting (the) husbands. My life, though, would forever be changed.

## Chapter 81: Bless Me, as well, Father

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I recall how my ex used to complain about having to endure the likes of Clare and the other guys at the unit. A smoke screen to block out just how tight he was with them – sort of a “I don’t need anybody” façade.

And so “the guys” started showing up at my door – all macho-mouthed about that poor member of the team wallowing at the BOQ. I was so tempted to quote some of those nasty tributes, but it would have just furthered my role as the Wicked Witch.

But things were so getting out of hand. There was the camping trip with the boys – all necessary gear purchased at Sears on my charge account. I knew because I called to verify and explain our marital situation. No problem, I was told, this situation was common and access to my card would be denied him in the future.

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This would continue. Being played and there'd be no peace. But it only furthered my desire to no longer continue being married to him.

So, like Manny\* back there in Norfolk, I reached back to those forgotten Catholic roots and called the Rectory to speak to a priest. I didn't know what I hoped to achieve: that he'd smooth the troubled waters, help me to strengthen my resolve, etc. ?

I don't recall how our meeting was arranged – at the rectory or at home, but he was a nice young man, and easy to talk to. No doubt I poured my heart out, but – as with the attorney – wasn't completely forthcoming. *(Note: upon reflection, my holding back was basically in consideration of our children – that I no tarnish whatever the bond between them and their dad).*

\* NOTE: Uncle Manny

Maybe my talk with the priest imbued me with some kind of spiritual glow, otherwise how to explain how I played right into my ex's devious hand?

I call him and explained my talk with the priest and was struck by his seemingly thoughtful response. How many times over the years had I fallen for his psychopathic-like games, yet still hadn't learned my lesson? So, all the while he was mouthing words in response to mine, his mind was going a mile-a-minute.

It was only a few days later, that I received a call from the good father: His voice barely able to suppress his excitement. My husband had not only contacted him at the rectory, but also invited him out to dinner – and what a dinner it was!

After being picked up at the rectory, the good father was then driven along the Silver Strand (*my old haunt*) directly to the Officer's Club in Coronado. No doubt my husband then turned on his charm. It was, as the priest related to me, an unbelievable treat for a poor boy from Brooklyn (*was his host, I wondered, also in full-dress uniform?*).

What then followed the priest's glowing account, was his wonderment that I was so willing to walk away from such a privileged life. And so my ex-husband charmed the hell out of the priest!!

*Afterthought:*

*A memory now surfaces of the priest once suggesting I might be interested in being his guest as the next meeting of the Good Ladies of St. Charles parish. This came about when I'd spoken of being shunned by former friends in the neighborhood. (ahh, poor me!)*

*I recall entering a room with women gathered around a table and the priest introducing me. He then led me to a chair further down, then took his seat off to the corner of the room.*

*There might have been a nod or two, but the ladies more-or-less looked past me, then the head lady began conducting business – one, ironically, on the need to gather more members into the congregation.*

*Throughout, as the ladies bantered back and forth, I sat, ignored, now and then exchanging glances with the silent priest – my eyes probably questioning what the hell I was doing there. It was all rather surreal. In fact, as the room emptied – with nary a look in my direction – I questioned the priest's motives: Was it to show how much better off I'd be as that privileged wife, rather than an almost divorced one?*

## Chapter 82: What Restraining Order?

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Because my then husband took no interest in such things, I was in charge of home furnishings – nothing elaborate, but presentable.

As the marriage crumbled, I sought ways to hold things together – one being the purchase of a certain piece of furniture, specifically for the “Man of the house”. It was one of those popular new items called recliners. As intended, it proved – at least for a while – a tremendous boost to his always starved ego.

Initially, following the separation, he would stop by for daytime visits – much to my discomfort. I believe he was now driving a pickup truck, and I would watch him assume a confident swagger as if he was just returning home from work.

Once, when I followed him out the door to discuss some private

matter out of earshot of the kids, he had the audacity to put an arm around my shoulder to again impress the neighbors. However, that façade took a sudden shift when he got behind the wheel: leaning close, he murmured these parting words: *“You were a damn fish for believing all those lies I fed you for so many years!”*

Then, the evening visits started. He’d show up, bleary-eyed, a small revolver poking from his shirt pocket, and sink down into his so-designated recliner.

The kids would be there, of course, long acclimated to such a scene. And there I was, in possession of a restraining order granting me the power to have him bodily removed by law enforcement.

In what would be, I’m sure, the last nightly visit, things took a bizarre turn: there came the sound of an explosion from the farm

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across the way. I immediately looked over at my ex and watched a knowing smile play across his face.

It was unbelievable! Here was this grown man: a father, husband, ranking military Officer reverting back to what he couldn't escape: The Sailor (*Volume I – page 235*)

*Note: I debated whether to exclude the children, but it's difficult when certain ones (or one) make themselves an unavoidable part of the narrative.*

And, so, the oldest daughter became her fathers staunch advocate and would remain so throughout – her devotion, something he fully utilized throughout the years – and, if true, had its beginnings the night of that explosion:

According to her, “Dad” soon realized that one explosive was a dud and must be retrieved. So he had her cross the street, climb the tree and hand it over to him. BRAVO!!! Or, a load of B.S.!!

The following day, as I was standing out front, Mr. Z., the dairy farmer, came across the street, heading in my direction. It was the first time I could recall him doing so. Often, though, when I visited the cows with my young daughter, we'd encounter Mr. Z. He was always pleasant enough, but a man of few words.

This time, however, he had much to say. In an angry tone, he informed me that he knew it was my husband who set off that explosive; followed by a lengthy diatribe regarding the dangers of inciting a stampede, etc. Then, as if to cushion the impact of his words, his voice softened and he assured me that, for my sake, he would not report the incident to the police. So, for my children's sake, I ignored the restraining order, and for my sake, the explosion wasn't reported. One could say my ex led a charmed life.

## Chapter 83: The Change of Command

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It was though my oldest daughter, no doubt, that I learned of her father's promotion. With Clare's departure, he would succeed him as Commanding Officer of the unit.

I never did know how many men comprised that unit, as I'd never been informed of its size. My only connection came from the Officers and wives – with one exception: A young Navy Chief I connected with via phone calls when things on the home front were becoming desperate.

I can't recall how it came about – did he call me, or did I call him? It's often been said, if you want the inside information on how the Navy operates, ask a Chief (*in the Army, that holds true for a Sergeant*). So we would chat, and I would learn that my husband used the same maneuvers here in California as in Norfolk, to secure extra money.

I, of course, was the culprit – the one with a firm grip on the purse strings. If one were to believe him (*and he was believable*), the poor guy was always broke.

Although I'd heard it all before, I was still stunned that he'd still use me in that manner. Nonetheless, it raised the never-ending question: Why the insatiable need for money, and what does he do with it??

*Note: The young Chief was married with children, and I did meet him once when I was with my husband. It's amazing he didn't pick up any vibes with his psycho antenna. In truth, those calls could have escalated, but I (sadly) ended them. He was married, with children.*

So, aside from the priest – who my husband beguiled, and the young Chief, I didn't exactly attract supporters – except for my devoted brother back east. On the other hand,

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I didn't reveal much – until now.

Even all these years later, it's hard to believe the audacity of that phone call – the one from my estranged husband:

In a most matter-of-fact manner, he announced his promotion and inquired as to how I felt about taking on the role of Commanding Officer's Wife.

It was as if those separation papers didn't exist; that I was in a sulk, and he was now bestowing upon me an utmost honor – one of recognition. I thought back to when he got that commission back in East Rockaway – his declaration that it was all about him, not me. There was no “we”. I was just along for the ride – it was his career, not mine, etc., etc. My God, I couldn't ever meet his ship or show up at the airport. So, in words along that line, I turned down his “offer”.

The fact that he thought I'd be elated over his generous offer just convinced me he had absolutely no conscience.

A couple of days later, I got a call from Jewel – the first I'd heard from her since the separation. It was a short call asking if it was okay if she, temporarily, stayed on in my place. I told her it was more than fine, and that was that.

*Note: It would be a long while before I finally learned of the other wives from the unit.*

When I learned the children were to attend the Change of Command ceremony, I got them all new outfits (*from Sears*). As I recall, one child was away somewhere, but all five were nicely dressed, as they climbed into the limo for the trip to Coronado. When they returned – via the limo – little was said, other than they were mostly

left on their own.

Actually, the only proof of their presence came in a lone, enlarged picture depicting their dad, in full dress uniform, holding the littlest of them all.

*Note: As I end this segment, I've yet to decide how much further mention is due the oldest daughter – except for how she inserted herself in all things relating to her father. I might go so far as to refer to her as “the Daddy’s Girl from Hell!”.*

*In truth, he used her loyalty to his advantage and sometimes verged on crossing the line”. Her sad life today is much a product of his influence.*

*Also today, what I've learned in bits and pieces is that my ex's second marriage – slant-eye versus round-eye “variety” did not satisfy that elusive “Impossible Dream”.*

## Chapter 84: Scattered Memories

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*(Larry Majercin note: The pages jump from page 330 to page 341. This coincides with the Chapter breakdown Elizabeth provided).*

I've stolen this heading from a once popular song because it's rather difficult – as I enter the so-called “twilight years”, to recall things in orderly fashion.

What comes to mind now is the day my ex's “toys” – the pickup truck and motorcycle were delivered to the house. I had no idea what was going on until the eldest daughter immediately claimed ownership of said truck. Without any word to me, he'd “bequeathed” her the truck, and the oldest son, the motorcycle.

Fortunately, the latter gift had a short duration as I watched it take flight beneath him and tumble down the hilly front lawn. There was no talk back when I called the base and had someone come to retrieve the thing. The car, though, was a different story:

In my eldest daughter's eyes, that truck made her some kind

of Goddess on Wheels; one with “the power”. If I “requested” a ride to the grocery store, it meant filling the tank, so she could joy ride her friends around. In truth, she became insufferable, and I’m ashamed to say she mouthed off at me to such a degree (that) I hauled off and slapped her in the face. All good things, though, come to an end, as would eventually happen.

In the meantime, I was still in the dark as to my ex’s whereabouts. And then, I had a visitor: one of the unit’s wives actually came to call. I didn’t know her very well, but for the fact that she had bragging rights when we wives had to go through security clearance with the CIA. This wife, she loved to brag, had a higher security clearance than her husband’s due to whatever government job she held.

Anyways, it turned out, she was still on a lucky steak: to my absolute shock, she informed me that she and her husband were the only couple in the whole unit whose marriage was still intact. Even Clare and Jewel had parted ways. (*My friend, Sharon, who lived close by, later told me that the twins were divided up: Clare got the boy and Jewel got the girl*).

In my mind, thoughts kept swirling around. I certainly wasn't happy being the first to file papers, but now I felt more justified in feeling there was something "tainted" in the unit's overall operations. I recall the Officer's suicide and we wives warned to stay away from the widow. Was there a cloak of silence, too, keeping the wives from seeking solace with each other? (*No one called me for comfort, and I was the Commanding Officer's wife!*).

*Note: I really wanted to ask my visitor if she knew my ex's*

*whereabouts, but somehow, didn't want her aware of my ignorance. Actually, I sensed she believed I was privy to far more than I let on, which was laughable.*

I don't know how I learned that my ex-husband had left the country. I struggled to remember our last encounter, but only one comes to mind – which probably best defines the last time I would ever see him again.

The day he came by after I filed the papers, how, to save face, he put his arm around my shoulder to impress the neighbors. Then, as he got into the truck and leaned low – out of the neighbor's hearing and informed me what a fish I was for believing all those damn lies he told for all those years.

Although I never saw him again, his presence was a constant in my life in struggles ahead. Never once, though, did I regret ending the marriage.

When the notice came, it was – of course – addressed to me. It stated that due to numerous payments in arrears, said pick-up truck should be prepared and ready for repossession on such-and-such date.

As heartless as my reaction probably sounds, I was honestly relieved. That truck had brought nothing but disruption in my already chaotic life – a power struggle between daughter and mother. Yet, she was strangely quiet when shown the notice. It brought back memories of the hurt when, many years back, I received the bills from the tailor who outfitted my husband's new Officer's wardrobe. So, she too, must feel that hurt. And, so too, will eventually forgive him.

When the day came, her siblings helped her remove every bit not belonging there and watched the repossession take place. Never did I imagine I'd be involved in such a thing – a REPO!!

Before he left the country, without a word, I'd spoken to him by phone, rather than in person, regarding the dentist: the children needed work done and I'd ask if he'd cover the expense. In so many words he said that it would be fine; just to have the bill sent to him. After all, I thought, he couldn't escape this obligation since he resided within range at the BOQ in Coronado.

Not long after the car repo event, came another calamity: I must have been out of range when the phone rang and the "littlest one" answered. When she sought me out, she was visibly upset and described how some man from the dentist's office told her if her mommy didn't pay the bill, her mommy would have to go to jail. What a cruel thing to say to a small child! All thanks to a heartless dad who took flight, escaping all obligations.

And, yet, as this journal shows from the beginning, he was always escaping obligations. This time, though, my decision to legally separate gave him license to take flight.

It wasn't long after these calamities that I attended a school function with my young daughter – the only one left in grade school. While I stood holding her hand, a young gentleman holding the hand of his young one approached me. He obviously knew who I was, though he was unfamiliar to me.

“Ma’am”, he said, “I just want you to know what a privilege it’s been to serve under your husband.” It was just the wrong words at the wrong time. Anger just welled up in me and words spewed out I can’t even recall. I could see the shock on his face as he made a hasty retreat. No doubt I only managed to garner pity for the guy that young man so honored. I was the Witch – the Dragon Lady.

## Chapter 85: An Abundant Harvest

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There were times if I had the choice of dealing with self-centered, egotistic, sassy-mouthed teen-agers, or being locked away in a solitary cell with a small collection of books, I would have gladly chosen the latter.

Yet, at times, there was admiration that a child of mine had no qualms about getting in my face. If I had dared such a thing with my mother, her wrath would have caused the walls to tremble. In truth, I was probably more like my father in my inability to react in kind, though he had no qualms about sending me into the fire.

In fact, when my husband was still around, in any situation, where I could have used his backing in dealing with the female teens, he rather enjoyed siding with them. Looking back, he often edged on the psychopathic in that way.

One day a visitor showed up at the door – grim-faced, to be sure. In his hand was a document of sorts identifying him as being from the Department of Public Health. He then informed me that a complaint had been lodged against me for creating a health hazard with swarms of flies drawn to the over-ripe fruit fallen from the trees – the ones planted in the back yard by my husband when we first moved in.

Those little twiggy branches had grown into three rather large, leafy trees that yielded an unbelievable amount of fruit – all ripening at once. There was once a time when I could have shared that bounty with once friendly neighbors – the ones now reporting me to the Department of Health.

It's not as if flies were a never-before-seen nuisance in the neighborhood: for years, everyone

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on the street had been complaining with the swarms of flies coming from the dairy farm across the street. Newspapers and tarps had to be spread across car roofs to keep the fly manure from ruining the paint. As far as I knew, those flies were tolerated – mine weren't.

I can't recall now how the fruit was cleaned up, but I venture to guess the embarrassment of peers hearing of mom's imminent arrest might have goaded the kids into clean-up action.

The grim-faced on, of course, made a return visit to see that I had complied, without venturing outside. He had a clear view of the swept yard. The family dog, Dingo, also happened to be out there: and, true to his neurotic nature, shakily stepped onto the patio to check out the stranger, who must have sent out bad vibes Dingo's way. In a show of contempt – or outright terror, the dog squatted down, deposited a pile of poop and ran off.

## Chapter 86: The Insidious Nature of Things

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I'm not sure how far I'll be able to go in this journal, but I feel a necessity to touch on the subject of my drinking – something my children often sneeringly allude to. So be it. There are those who drink, those who don't and those who define the disease of alcoholism – such as my ex-husband.

How else, then, to explain that which I wasn't going to allude to but once, but now feel is the crux of what tore the marriage asunder and my inability to face the truth:

Some years ago, there was a sensational story about a woman named Elaine Bobbit, who was accused of committing an act most haunting to all men: using a pair of scissors, she snipped off her husband's penis as he slept.

In his TV appearances, the husband looked sad and bewildered.

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Garnering sympathy, of course, Elaine, in her defense, had been heard to say that she couldn't take it anymore – alluding to acts occurring in the bedroom. Privately, I felt a deep kinship with Elaine Bobbit, knowing the desperation with unwanted, drunken sexual advances in the bedroom.

As mentioned way back in these journals, began back in East Rockaway – the gun to his head, thereby forcing me to endure his advances until he fell into a drunken sleep. In the light of day, all seemed normal. There might have been a hazy recollection on his part, or none at all. As with my mother's antics, I chose to block it all out. Mostly, I adhered to my mother-in-law's mantra: Peace at any Price!!

In later years, I wondered what the now-older children imagined transpired behind the closed bedroom door with The Great Santini. When I married and started a family,

it was expected that my children would experience far better circumstances than mine.

Long after my ex-husband left for good, I would have a recurring dream. I'd be in bed upstairs and hear his all-familiar Long Island voice downstairs. A feeling of dread would then wash over me, knowing he would soon be climbing the stairs and reaching for me in the bed. Thankfully, I always woke up right after the sound of his voice.

During all those hellish years in San Diego when I got to observe and experience things never before imagined (*how he'd sneer and say, "yeah, you've been to every drug store in the country!"* – well, I was now getting there), it was a struggle to survive. Luckily, I had a couple married friends who stuck with me, but mostly I was thrown in with the divorced group of women who enjoyed a sexual freedom that was just

abhorrent to me.

I had absolutely no interest or desire to engage in any physical contact with any man again (or, any person). Because of what I now accept as sexual abuse from my then husband. I'm now adverse to any sort of touching, which has led to my building an invisible wall around me. I don't even like visiting a hairdresser. It pains me that it's so difficult to hug or be hugged, but it is what it is.

It' wasn't until I reached out to Al-Anon that I learned to recognize the Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde personality changes my husband so often exhibited and so unique in alcoholics. It explains but doesn't excuse his often-vicious verbal attacks aimed at me. However, I saw the drinking as a means to cover his own insecurities, his need to be somebody. He was incapable of love, but there was a unique attachment to his mother.

## Chapter 87: What Comes To Mind

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When I was young – about in second grade, we lived in a downstairs apartment in Taftville, Connecticut and I recall it being rather gloomy – my young mind especially hating the dirt yard outside the only entrance. Come spring, though, a lone lilac bush in the neighbor’s yard would begin to bloom – its luscious, sweet-scented flowers erasing – at least for a while – the gloomy view. To this day, lilacs remain – aside from daffodils – my favorite flower.

My bedroom with its one window offered little solace as the window overlooked a dark alley. At night I’d imagine many faces peering in at me and wonder why someone ever bothered to install that window.

There came a time, though, when the darkness became necessary – a preventative measure in dealing with the childhood diseases such as measles and chicken pox. So I became bedridden with

one or the other, and because there was fear the disease could cause blindness, the shade was drawn on my viewless window, my bedside lamp emitting a soft glow.

Aside from that, only one vivid memory remains of that bedridden time: Periodically, I was forced to swallow a concoction I came to dread, administered by the spoonful. It had a heavy, cloying odor, and lest an equally cloying taste in my mouth.

It wasn't until adulthood, when I happened to mention that mystery concoction, an answer was provided: I had been given doses of a popular opiate, Paregoric. At the time, it was still sold over the counter in stores in New England – popular for rubbing on the swollen gums of teething babies. Eventually, it was banned, as was many opiate-laced home remedies – going back to Lydia Pinkum's Pep Pills for Pioneer Ladies. Often, I would imagine that the flames emanating from opium dens smelled much like Paregoric.

Flash-forward to many years later: one evening, as my then husband was performing his long-sleeved kimono routine, marching up and down the living room, (supposedly) engrossed in ascribing the contents of the guerilla warfare manual, he'd reach into a sleeve to extract a small bottle. As he drained its contents, my curiosity was aroused: – there was something about its size and shape. So, I asked. Without missing a step, he nonchalantly replied that it was Paregoric, amply supplied by the Navy Corpsman... my old haunt!! I didn't bother to clue him in on my familiarity with his "cheap drunk" concoction: something, it seemed still in ample supply – stored in warehouses!

In my mind, though, came the thought that my long ago nemesis will again be filling my bedroom with its noxious fumes.

## Chapter 88: Flying the Friendly Skies

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In time, my eldest daughter move out on her own and got an apartment in nearby I.B. (Imperial Beach, California), where – no surprise – it soon became a gathering place for her siblings. I imagine her letters to “Dear Dad” describing how she’d become a mother hen – always trying to upstage mom.

One day while my youngest daughter was in a car with neighbor, Peggy, running an errand in Imperial Beach, a black cloud of smoke appeared in the sky. “That’s my sister’s apartment”, my daughter called out. Peggy scoffed at such an idea: but soon enough, it became apparent she was right.

I can only imagine what a frightening sight it was for my young daughter to come upon her sister’s apartment in flames. I only arrived in the aftermath, trying to retrieve what could be saved – clothes, bedding, etc. – and seemed to recall a couple

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Scorched guitars, envisioning guys plucking away, puffing cigarettes.

The driveway was strewn with papers and a letter or two from father to daughter. I retrieved the latest one, curious as to how he was able to hold on to our daughter, so spell bound. Rather than asking how she was doing in her job, her social life, etc., it was (*no surprise!*) filled with meanderings about him.

The contents escape me today, but it was all leading up to how he had found someone to fill his once lonely life, etc. It stirred memories of my own father, so immersed in himself, confiding, in most intimate detail, his manly needs. No doubt our daughter was jubilant in sharing this inside scoop with her siblings.

*Historical note: This father/daughter bond continued on, throughout Okinawa and when he, his wife and two children*

*were now residing in upstate New York.*

By then, this West Coast family was more or less estranged from the East Coast clan. “Meem” (*as the grandkids referred to her*), no doubt, clearing the way for her son’s return. “Peace at any Price”, her credo.

The last event, in fact, came in a call from “Meem” asking me for a favor: She’d received a call from Kim, her daughter-in-law, in which she frantically informed that my ex had suffered a heart attack and was now hospitalized.

When asked, she had no idea the name of the hospital, but kept repeating how old her stricken husband now looked. One thing, though, she did make clear was his insistence that he speak to his eldest daughter out west.

One noteworthy trait Meem often displayed was a dose of dry humor, and to my surprise (*and delight*), she suggested that maybe her son was going to ask

our daughter to take his children in case he died.

Of course, all kinds of thoughts then twirled through my head. What did she know of the situation in that marriage that would warrant her outlandish comment. Had that glorious Bamboo Fever run its course? Although I can't recall how I contacted that daughter – our relationship in and out like the tide – but I delivered her dad's request to her and even called Meem back with the name of her son's hospital.

*Note: He survived that attack, but I never learned why he was desperate to speak to her. Sadly, though, it was the last time Meem and I ever spoke.*

#### AND NOW FOR THE FRIENDLY SKIES

It was later after the apartment fire that I received the phone call from a woman identifying herself as a reporter for the local paper.

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She wanted my reaction to my daughter's near plane crash in the Pacific Ocean. WHAT DAUGHTER?! WHAT PLANE?! I was dumbstruck. The reporter, realizing I hadn't a clue, was more than happy to provide details.

The plane, carrying my eldest daughter, suddenly lost engine power on its flight from Okinawa, losing altitude over the Pacific Ocean. Fortunately, the pilot restarted the engines just in time and averted crashing into the sea.

Her words filled me with overwhelming anger – as opposed to relief – and I slammed the phone down; my mind replaying all those secrets and lies. The maneuvering to garner attention, etc.

But I didn't call the eldest one, I called the middle one – her willing stooge – and verbally lit into her. She was a party to all this, and I was most pleased to scare the hell

out of her with news of the near crash – this, I hoped to convey, is what happens when you get caught in that web of deceit.

*Epilogue: To this day, my relationship with the eldest daughter is silent, but it continued to ebb and flow over the years. I never allowed myself to vent my feelings to her, knowing that she was a product of her father's influence. That said, there was one exception:*

*After his return to the states with new wife and family, there was an occasion where my son had answered the phone. He then approached me to announce that his oldest sister was on the phone and wanted him to reach into my purse and retrieve my wallet: The purpose was to provide her with my Social Security number for her dad's income tax return. My angry reaction caused a riff between us that lasted for some time.*

## Chapter 89: Elephants in the Midst

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It was a struggle, money-wise, to hold things together in the house on Saturn (Boulevard). I'd sold the picnic table and benches brought from Norfolk, etc. As I never knew how much or when the provider would provide.

One day a Navy truck pulled up in the garage. Without a word, two young sailors got out and began to remove two large crates from the bed. They then drove away, leaving us to ponder the contents, or how to possibly open up those crates.

Soon our neighbor, Sam, summoned by a son, showed up with a crowbar and began disassembling the first crate. Inside was something shrouded in paper – which, when torn away, revealed a heavy piece of decorative statuary... an Asian elephant in all its glory; a fabulous adornment for a lush, carefully tended flower garden – certainly not in our small back yard with those overgrown fruit

trees, that drew the attention of the Department of Health. And then, out popped its twin in the second crate.

As the boys stared at what their dad had wrought, one suggested using the crowbar to see if the elephants had money stashed inside. I, on the other hand, began composing a for sale notice for the local Shopper's Guide. In a few days, the phone rang and a woman's high-pitched voice inquired if I still had those elephants. When I replied 'yes', she almost squealed with delight, and began a non-stop tale of what happened to her elephants (*are there planeloads of these things, I wondered*). So, the plane carrying the elephants her husband had purchased for her had crashed and she was devastated, and here I was, like a fairy godmother, replacing her loss. *Note: My only regret was in not charging more for what was to become "Hot Items".*

After I'd written my sister-in-law (*the nice one!*) regarding the elephants, she sent a clipping from the Long Island paper reporting on Congressmen flocking to buy up said elephants.

In trying to recall when this happened, I thought of plane crashing on its way to the states, and thought it more likely it was departing Vietnam rather than Okinawa. So, the war must have been ending (*After all, my ex did meet his second wife in Vietnam*). In that regard, a scenario forms in my head regarding the circumstances leading to my ex's stupid impulse to buy those elephants.

I picture him enjoying a liquid lunch with fellow Officer's and one suggesting they check out those popular items. Deciding the wives would be blown away by those colorful pieces of Asian art, the guys would be waving wads of cash at the vendors.

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My ex, playing the Big Shot, would follow suit from a wallet stuffed with money withheld from my support.

I often wondered what he did with all the money. He kept to himself. Maybe like this, in bits and pieces. Death bed quote: “It was all about me and money.” Sometimes though, the time things happen. Matters less than the how or why.

That he eventually kept all the money to himself as he lived far and away from the US, attests to his ability to “make it all about him.” It pains to say it, but he lacked the ability to love or be loved. The only woman he cared about and respected: his mother.

## Chapter 90: The Impossible Dream

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When my ex left San Diego for the last time and headed for Okinawa and (*possibly*) stopovers in Vietnam, he'd send cassettes to the kids – rambling bits of this and that; often sounding as if he were holding court in his quarters, playing “Pappa-san” to fans wandering in and out to pay respect. The kids found it all rather puzzling (*I dubbed it showboating*).

Then came the strains of a plaintive song called *The Impossible Dream*, the highlight of a current Broadway musical, *Man of La Mancha*. The words lamenting the man's struggle to reach the heights of whatever.

What followed, though – absent any more tapes – was a letter to me, one of the only two I was ever to receive from him again.

I suppose it was meant to sound like a heart-felt plea to forgive him (and) his faults. How he was never able to

reach what he strived for – straight from *Man of La Mancha*! I pictured him sipping rum, or whatever he could con from the Corpsman.

The letter – a mishmash of regrets, failed attempts, etc., brought back that unsettling memory of the scene played out for the first time in the beginning of the marriage: He'd gotten terribly drunk and wanted sex, and I was too appalled and disgusted to oblige. He'd then knelt down at the bed and appeared to be crying. Then I glanced at his flayed fingers peeking out at me to observe his performance – this before the interplay with the gun.

I thought of all those drunken games played out through the years by a husband and father, unseen by his peers – especially those adoring young men serving under him. He would not change. He was who he was. That I survived was practice for what was to come.

## Chapter 91: In Need of a Friend

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Following the separation, my status in the neighborhood, as previously explained, underwent a drastic change. It's too bad those women protecting their marriage from me, didn't know how safe they were.

It's bad enough I was coping with unruly teenagers, the drug culture, abortions given out like candy, etc., I was also struggling with my own state of health. As for the company of men, the last thing I would ever desire on this earth was any kind of relationship with the opposite sex – physical or otherwise.

Given this state of mind, I was ill-equipped to deal with the world I was thrust into when the money ran out. The women I would encounter who were, like me, single (*and mostly*) with children.

In the meantime, my neighbor, Sharon, stuck with me through thick and thin. She was loud and boisterous at times,

But, she was my lifeline to sanity. Another neighbor, Peggy, was the opposite – quiet and soft spoken, until – that is – she became a drunken mess.

In the beginning, she and second husband, Dennis (*she and Sam, the Border Patrol guy had divorced. In truth, Peg's drinking was a factor in that divorce, but, it had not as yet spiraled out of control*) took me along on social outings.

There were dinners at the Chief's Club at Ream Field, movies at the Coronado Base (*We once sat through the movie adaptation of a long Broadway musical, and Peggy slept through it all*) and camping trips in the mountains.

Little by little, though, her drinking progressed, she'd come by at night, drunk and disheveled, claiming her son had thrown her out. This burden, I didn't need and eventually forced me to make a clean break.

Sharon, though, continued on with her, describing a late night call on Christmas Eve

from Peggy. She had gotten drunk and fell into the decorated Christmas tree. She begged Sharon to come and restore it before the kids woke up. And Sharon complied. It's the role of we enablers to make sure the drunks don't have to face reality.

*Postscript: After I had moved away to the low-cost housing, Sharon called with sad news: Beforehand, Peggy's daughter had been in a motorcycle accident and lost a leg. How long, we wondered, would Peggy survive such an ordeal. At first, she kept her drinking under control, timed according to the social workers' visits. But she got caught under the influence when the worker arrived a day earlier:*

*It was then decided that Peg would be hospitalized for what would be her second stint in the place she called a "living hell". Instead, she drove up to an overpass, left the car – and to onlookers horror – climbed over the railing and to her death on traffic below.*

Sharon's husband – a retired Navy Chief, was also a heavy drinker; doing his chugging at the local watering hole – The Anchor (*too low-toned for my ex*). When “Husband Jim” sensed he was over the limit, he'd call Sharon to come retrieve him and the car. That she did took enabling to the hilt., but it had its advantages:

Unlike my once prolonged nights, all required by Sharon was to – as she put it – “tuck Husband Jim in bed”, and he stayed immoveable until dawn's early light. So, with both of us with long empty nights to fill, we headed for one of the few night spots available in Imperial Beach – each specializing in country music – live or canned.

One in particular, on the main-head leading to the Silver Strand offered a medley of live and canned – the former a guy with his guitar playing a medley of the country-western sob songs that long ago emanated from my drunken mother's bedroom. Life is strange.

Luckily, Sharon wasn't a drinker – she, the driver. But she liked to dance; so, while I sipped wine (*No, kids, I didn't come home "wasted"*), she got to twirl around now and then. Like a lot of heavy women, she was light on her feet.

Closing time was the stuff of a country song: how the gals suddenly all looked so pretty, etc. I, the skinny one, often had to fend off offers to visit some guy's nearby motel room. As much as I welcomed a break from long nights at home, those offers never ceased to repulse me.

*Note: Sharon and I had a quick chat with the guitar player's girlfriend in the ladies room. She spoke of how lonely the poor guy was with his wife so far away and how she was there to help ease that loneliness. As more time passed, I was to encounter women so far removed from my ex's cock-eyed version of such a one: "Pretty, as in the kitchen, wearing an apron."*

Along with easing lonely nights, Sharon was my mainstay in trips to the commissary, visits to the school on behalf of the kids, appointments I had to fulfill, etc. Once, we dropped the middle daughter – somewhat of a rebel – at the dentist; when we returned, I was told she had jumped out of the dentist’s chair and run away. I also borrowed money from Sharon when the check (*so often*) was late. But one favor would have been a bit much to ask:

I would have loved a ride to the beach, if only to watch the ebb and flow of the ocean. However, Sharon once made clear her thoughts on the matter: she couldn’t understand why husband Jim would leave on a Sunday morning, buy a paper and coffee and head for the beach. That he’d just sit there, wasting time, staring out at the water, she couldn’t understand. Reverie, unfortunately, wasn’t Sharon’s strong point.

There was one neighbor on Saturn Blvd., though, who – for whatever reason, seemed to hold a grudge, that was Corky the dairy farmer’s wife (*his name escapes me at the moment*). Granted, she once sent the cow manure over to fertilize the lawn (*without my input*) and once sent a dressed rabbit, imploring me to keep it secret from her mother-in-law (*Luckily, I did eat and cook rabbit*).

Otherwise, I seldom saw or spoke to her – even when I visited the cows with my youngest daughter. My young neighbor, though, was a regular visitor, and would take her children (*one or two?*) along to swim in the pool. Sadly, she and her husband divorced, and the house was eventually sold.

One summer’s day, it was extremely hot: I was alone with my youngest daughter, who was listless, and I thought of that pool and how much she’d enjoy that cool water.

Granted, as to how my teenagers practically lived at that farm, I was a bit hesitant to approach Corky. God knows what tales my kids carried over there. Nonetheless, I went over to ask if it was okay, in the heat, if my young one could cool off in the pool.

Her reaction was a lengthy lecture on my responsibility to keep a stern eye on my child; that she would not be liable for any injury, etc., etc. Then she went into a spiel about that young neighbor who would sit chatting, drinking coffee and completely ignore those kids in the pool (*Why Corky didn't set her straight, is a (mystery)*).

Then and there I wanted to withdraw my request, but I'd already promised my daughter. So, I brought her over, let her paddle about under my watchful eye – and never laid eyes on Corky. Was this payback, I wondered, for my husband's misdeed in setting off those explosives? Her husband certainly put the burden on me.

Speaking of payback: One day Corky's daughter came to see me. She was angry and upset and wanted my input on a clash she just had with her mother.

It was known that Corky and her husband were close friends with members of the clergy – missionaries, I believe. My kids, I'm sure, must have been the ones to mention how Mr. Z. would take the priests – dressed in civvies, for a fun stay in Reno.

Apparently, the priests were again visiting, and all were gathered around enjoying a meal according to the daughter, that's when she and Corky almost came to blows over the daughter's use of a cuss word. "Isn't it hypocritical", she asked for her mother to cuss her out for using one of her mother's many such words on a regular basis?

I, of course, gave the standard sermon on "company manners" (*obviously, Corky stifled herself around the priest*). Anyway, the daughter's seeking me out was payback for her mother's rudeness to me.

## Chapter 92: It's a Long Way to Nowhere

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When I made the decision to legally separate, I gave little thought to the consequences. My only goal was to sever the bond of husband and wife, but no matter the hell that lay ahead, I never regretted that decision.

Before me, I have a list of dates beginning with July 2, 1969 – marking the separation. Then on July 1, 1973, my ex permanently retired and on July 3, 1974, the divorce was final (*Strange how the month of July figured*). The only departure from that was how – on May 17, 1985, I became eligible for a new military I.D. card – which took ten years to achieve. I was 54 years old. *Note: The card was written into law to accommodate former spouses.* On January 2, 2006, I was awarded a portion of my ex's retirement (*owed since 1973!*) and he passed away on September 13, 2006.

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Given the fact that it took 33 years to be awarded that portion of my ex's retirement, only to reap its benefits for a short six months, one could say he got the last laugh after all. In the meantime, so began my 33-year odyssey;

Little-by-little, the money got scarcer and I began missing monthly mortgage payments. At one point, Sharon suggested I do what she did to make extra money: She cared for working mother's children (*Note: Sharon certainly wasn't in dire straits – she just like acquiring extra income*).

Anyway, I can't recall how, but I connected with a young gal whose husband was deployed. She worked at a downtown clothing store and it was arranged that she drop the little one off in early morning on her way to work.

From the onset, I was displeased that she'd drop off the little one unmindful of the fact that he was soaked to the gills, reeking of poo and

pee. Obviously, she waited until the last minute to scoop him up and head out the door. The urge to tell her I didn't appreciate her taking advantage of the lousy fifty cents an hour I charged, by saving the smelly chore for me, just stuck in my throat. I needed the money (and) didn't want to rock the boat. Further galling was the big box of Quaker Oats she handed me that needed top of the stove cooking (*eventually, I fed the little one from my own purchases*).

I was to encounter other such careless mothers, eager to drop off their burden, but less eager to pick them up at the allotted time. Once, though, I did encounter a young couple who lived in the complex where I now resided. They contacted me (by) word of mouth I guess and were looking for someone to more or less babysit their toddler daughter. Amazingly, my connection to this little family became far more meaningful than expected:

I would go there in the evenings, but daytime as well. She was a devoted new wife and mother, but on the quiet side. He, on the other hand, was more outgoing, but for one caution: He was a new, enthusiastic member of Scientology.

However, he was in the military, though I only saw him in civvies; and I was never there to witness his daily working routine. In time, though, mention started being made of his upcoming – and first – deployment.

It brought back memories of myself as a newly-married service wife and how ill-prepared I was for what that implied – and so it would be for this young wife and mother:

My memory is a bit faulty after all these years; but in truth, it became apparent she was not doing okay on her own. They'd be calls asking me to come over and keep her company – my youngest daughter sometimes joining me.

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In time, though, it was all too much; the young wife had a sort of breakdown, resulting in her husband's resigning from the military (*"Don't you ever pull a stunt like that!" replayed in my ears at the time.*)

I learned of this from the young woman's dad when he contacted me at his daughter's behest; when he needed someone to watch the little girl for an hour or so.

He was a sweet, caring man, who expressed sadness at the turn of events. Then he paid me, thanked me many times over and that was the last I ever saw or heard from that sad family again.

*Note: I did veer off track a bit with this story – one of so many, but it is telling that it stayed with me all these years. Maybe it was the cruel manner in which my new husband informed me of his first deployment: a quick phone call (that I missed) announcing a four-month absence. Surely, he knew this ahead of time, but chose the quick cut.*

## Chapter 93: On the Dole

383-b

Those many years ago when my family moved to the peninsula, I still recall the shock of seeing the outhouse, the water pump in the sink and the lack of electricity – which, thankfully, was soon updated by my hard-working father – starting with a generator.

But not all were so lucky:

There was one house, almost upon the water, occupied by a single mother with children. What drew my attention were the whispered comments about her: How she and her children were the island's only family on welfare. But what sparked my curiosity was that long ago, time in Taftville, when my father became outraged over someone's offer of a bag of groceries. It was trying times back then, people out of work, etc., but for people like my father, people on welfare were scum, preferring handouts to hard work. Better to starve than go that low.

Nonetheless, as was my nature, I did pop in for a visit. I recall the little ones scurrying about – one a toddler in saggy diapers, drinking from a can of condensed milk.

The mother was a thin, harried woman with wispy gray hair – feet bare on worn linoleum floors; the house sparsely furnished. I did note empty cans of that condensed milk scattered about. It was a depression scene – and a memory that was to resurface many years later.

I can't recall how I learned of my ex's retirement – no doubt via the eldest daughter. Nonetheless, it heralded the chain of events that put me on that road to nowhere.

It took a while to realize that the month had run out and no money had come. Maybe, I'll wait a few more days, etc., etc. Then, in a panic, I called the one person who had the power to rectify the situation – a regretful decision:

With shaky fingers, I dialed Captain Kane's home number. Surprisingly, he answered the phone. In truth, I couldn't have gone much higher – he, once from Officer's Row in Norfolk, and then in overall charge of the Amphibious Units – my ex's included – in Coronado.

So, I poured my heart out to him, explaining how the support money had stopped without explanation, leaving me with two dependents, bills to pay, etc., and could he help rectify the situation.

Initially, when I'd identified myself, his tone was most pleasant. But all that changed when after hearing me out, he coldly had this to say: "Sorry, I do not get involved in family matters", and hung up.

I thought of the times I'd been an invited guest at Mrs. Kane's luncheons; how my then husband and I

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were guests at the Kane's cocktail parties. It was as if my ex had a wall of protection built around him. He, the golden child; me, the nagging shrew.

So, it was time for drastic measures, and it was Sharon who first uttered the dreaded word: welfare. Her sister and two sons, for whatever reason – given that Sharon and all grew up in an affluent home – were living on welfare for some time. I recall how that sister, severely overweight, seemed to embrace welfare as a God-given right. She'd brag about organizing protests in support of welfare rights. I couldn't help but find her overall attitude a bit repugnant.

Nonetheless, here was Sharon, drinking tea, and describing how I had no recourse but to apply for welfare – the sooner the better. In fact, given the paperwork involved, we'd best head there first thing the next day.

So much is now recalled in bits and pieces – events often too damn painful to resurrect, or others, simply lost in the diminishing memories of an aging mind. What is amazing is to find myself recording all this. As I'm about to reach my 90<sup>th</sup> year, and maybe damn well surpass it!

Anyway, there's little to recall of that trip to the welfare place – other than the dismal scene upon my arrival: a large room filled with benches occupied mostly by women and children – just about all of Mexican descent.

Off to the side was a sign-in area with a glass partition – which, as soon became apparent, served as a protective shield. A woman, who had approached the sign-in area, suddenly began raising her voice, her words echoing throughout

the room proclaimed to the hapless gal behind the glass: “If it wasn’t for needy people like me, you wouldn’t have a job!”

Sharon, ever observant of such moments, commented as to the truthfulness of the woman’s comment. In fact, as I wended my way through the “system”, I was to encounter many such women who were plucked from welfare rolls to fill low-paid jobs no one else wanted.

And so began my odyssey into the very world my father deemed worse than death. It was to last for many years, introducing me to the good, bad and ugly aspects of that very world. Mostly, it bore truth to my ex-husband’s smirking comments regarding those drug stores: I was ill-prepared for the harsh realities outside the cocoon of a stifled marriage. In terms of experience, he had the upper hand.

## Chapter 94: The Holy Blood of Jesus, but not of a Woman

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*Note: Looking back in the beginnings of this journal, I notice how my handwriting deteriorates in accordance with my failing vision.*

*As for the title of this entry: This is, after all, my journal, and I give myself the freedom to express my truths in whatever stark manner necessary to the narrative – even if distasteful.*

The hospital room back in Norfolk and that dialogue with Aunt Jean is a good place to start. As Manny lay half-awake in the hospital bed, I'd come from the restroom and whispered to Jean that I'd had a "bit" of a hemorrhage that even spattered the wall. That, in essence, is what led to her labeling such as God's curse on women.

Heavy bleeding back then was commonplace in women of child-bearing age – especially before birth control was available; some even resorted to using cloth baby diapers to stem the flow.

In my case, though, it was actually the now-available birth control pill that led me down that bloody path (*God's curse, indeed!*).

So, in contrast to the “Holy Blood” of Jesus, that which flowed from women – even that which brought forth Jesus, himself, was alluded to in whispers (*my then husband once had a fit when he saw my bloody undies soaking in cold water*).

So the bleeding followed me cross-country to San Diego, Maybe the emotional impact of the separation and events leading to it impacted the situation. I began experiencing severe cramps and gushes of blood that found me often prone on the sofa, seeking distraction in a book or TV.

For some reason, this prone position tended to inflame my middle daughter; but any explanation would only fuel her righteous wrath – a condition inherent in rebellious teens (*Justice served in abundance when they, too became frustrated parents*).

My mother-in-law, Meem, often voiced her favorite quote in describing the wiles of human nature; “*the squeaky wheel gets all the grease*”. Sometimes, though, it’s the only way to achieve needed attention.

I awoke one morning, after a night of much pain, and little sleep, determined – in spite of that persistent tremor – to seek medical help at the medical facility at Ream Field, nearby. There’s this memory, in bits and pieces, of entering the room. It was crowded as usual; yet, as if drawn to my pleading eyes, one of the nurses headed my way. No sooner did she lay a comforting hand on my shoulder, then the fireworks started, and I was immediately rushed in to see a doctor – two, in fact.

In a tearful gush of words, I recited my long, bloody, painful history and how I couldn’t take it anymore. Consequently, it was

decided that I needed the services of a Gynecologist / Obstetrician who specializes in such matters, although he was stationed at the large Naval Hospital at Balboa. He made regular circuits of the smaller facilities, and so I was given an appointment to see this GYN on his upcoming stop at Ream Field.

There was a sense of relief at having taken this giant step in seeking relief, yet each day seemed to drag on and on as I awaited that appointment.

I recall being struck by how young the GYN looked – young and brash and aware of his good looks as he flirted with the assisting nurse. I felt more of an onlooker than patient and immediately disliked him – a feeling that never wavered when, to my chagrin, he was to perform my later surgery.

As I lay in stirrups on the examining table, he kept up his flirty chatter and never once felt obliged to explain

the upcoming procedure, so I was totally unprepared for the ensuing pain as some sort of vacuum was inserted into my internal organs; the pressure I felt was as things inside me waxed and waned, or whatever. Then, it was over.

As the nurse helped me off the table, I shakily stood. Dr. “Ego” blithely informed me that I had a rather large tumor – nourished, most likely by the birth control begun in Norfolk, that must be surgically removed. I would be notified of the scheduling date of such surgery.

When middle daughter returned home – irked, as usual, at the sight of my prone position, I thought to gain some empathy by relating to my internal ordeal. Instead, she scoffed at my piddling tale, proclaiming that her friend’s abortion was far more painful. The times were a-changing!!!

## Chapter 95: “You Do What You Gotta Do”

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Those words were uttered to me by an older, sweet doctor I had when I eventually moved to Coronado. In truth, the only way I could have changed the course of things was to have been someone else.

So, what I had to do was take the steps necessary to survive and that meant needing the assistance of welfare. Food, of course, was the number one issue and it brings to mind a most unpleasant ordeal – though one of many:

I don't recall how or when, but I was directed to a distribution point where I'd receive some food essentials. It was agreed that Sharon, my mainstay, would pick me up early so as to be first in line. But when we arrived, the line was already a block or so long, and it became obvious that I was the only Anglo there – the rest composed of

Mexicans and their children.

As the line grew shorter, I began to hear complaining noises and some were even leaving their place in line. The answer came when I finally stepped up and heard the words, “Sorry, All the butter and cheese have run out.”

Apparently, such items were handed out in family-size portions – enough to last a goodly amount of time. It also became obvious that the early birds came from across the border – probably before dawn's early light, assuring that the butter and cheese would remain beyond my reach.

Did I resent the Mexicans reaping my benefits? Absolutely not! What I resented was being in their same wretched state. Even so, it was the road I'd chose, and they'd be many such instances of humility to be endured.

I soon qualified for food stamps and Medicaid, which covered myself and the dependents still under my care. It seemed that whenever I started seeing a dentist, the work on my teeth would go on and on. Right up to the time for the six-month check-up. So now, much was needed. Just about every tooth needed filling, which culminated in a most unpleasant ordeal called a root canal.

At one point, my regular dentist wasn't available, and another was substituting for him. As he checked my records, I sensed a chill in the air. He then made a crude remark about the expensive root canal work done at taxpayers' expense. On another occasion, a young, brash doctor pointed out how he was obliged to treat me free of charge, while he had years of student loans to repay. *Note: I now recall that this*

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*came about when another doctor had examined me and felt a suspicious sound in my neck he thought could be life threatening – something arterial. Consequently, I was sent to the local hospital for a lengthy procedure, hence, that brash doctor's show of anger.*

As time went on, I was to encounter many such instances of hostility – the worst when someone stole my welfare check: I was then living in the low-cost apartments – the mailbox a bit of a distance away.

When it became obvious the monthly check was a no-show, I was obliged to report it to Welfare, who then reported it to the police. I believe a notice was left on my door to contact the Imperial Beach Police Department – a group less likely back then to protect and serve.

Consequently, I was taken by police care to the local station. The officer behind the wheel speaking nary a word to me. While there, I spent what seemed like hours writing my name over and over – my presence garnering unfriendly looks. That same officer then drove me home, uttering not a word.

*Note: Sitting in that silence, I couldn't help but imagine what if he turned out to be the same officer I "gifted" that load of ammunition left behind by my ex. Surely, he made a bundle selling it.*

Anyway, I got the money back, but was left to wonder if it had been put in the wrong mailbox, or what??? There were to be many such humiliations over time though, and I'd often be left asking myself how the once wife of a Lieutenant Commander in the US Navy ended up like this. Well, he told me often enough that he was the high-ranking one, not me.

Granted, when I filed for the separation, I didn't think far ahead – relying, I suppose, on those past quoted, “High Hopes”. And for those interested enough to read my ditherings; wondering why I persist in digging up those old graves:

What happened was a big part of my life – 33 years of it, and it can't be swept under the rug. I was 50 years old, had never worked outside the home – as a lot of military wives back in my time, and instead of easing into those twilight years, I was swept into something far beyond visiting the Officer's pool on my own. Even being allowed those Community College courses he denied me would have helped equip me in facing the world outside that marriage cocoon. I don't think I began to fully mature until I broke the binds of that marriage. As defined, limbo is an intermediate place (or condition) – a suspended state of mind. And so it was for me.

## Chapter 96: How Much Is Too Much

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I once had a disturbing dream where I fell head-first from a great height. Going down, straight as an arrow, I headed deep within the earth – where, to my horror, I was entombed, head-first, in the enormous, gnarled roots of some ancient tree. I would surely have died a slow, painful death if not for waking up.

And that dream would often come to mind whenever I was faced with some unsettling situation:

I don't recall in what order, but there were three things to deal with, one after another: I underwent surgery, the divorce papers arrived and it was time to vacate the home on Saturn Boulevard. As for the divorce papers, it appeared that I had to contact a lawyer pronto as I needed one to represent me in court, in front of a judge!

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*Note: I often wondered the reaction if I flatly refused to abide by this. After all, without my cooperation, he risked committing bigamy in his rush to remarry. It came to mind how often I was met with silence when support money was not forthcoming.*

I had nothing to lose as the divorce papers offered me nothing but a house in foreclosure. How nice to be able to gum up the works. But such revenge could be too exhausting!!

Nonetheless, I hit a roadblock when I contacted my original lawyer: true to his stated distaste in dealing with military brass, he recused himself and I was left without legal counsel. That's when neighbor, Peggy, came to the rescue.

She connected me to her attorney, the one representing her in her divorce from the Border Patrol guy. Although he readily agreed, I couldn't shake off the discomfort I felt in knowing he and Peggy were dating.

No problem if not for the fact that he was married, with children – this coupled with the added fact that Peggy and the (*unaware*) wife exchanged long telephone chats, she confiding in the one dating her husband.

It never ceased to amaze me in what I observed in most of the divorced women I met. There was this sense of sexual freedom – minus any moral code. One woman I met who was divorced after many years of marriage, described how she fulfilled her sexual needs by calling her ex-husband over to service her, knowing she needn't fear contacting a sexual disease.

Long before *Sex and the City* became an eye-opening event on mainstream TV, most of the divorced women I encountered were way ahead of those “career girls”. In some ways, I guess I owe thanks to the “Great Santini” for stifling those impulses in myself.

*Note: I still can't clarify in my mind how it's possible to unlove (divorce, etc.) someone, yet engage in sex with them, or indulge in those one-night stands.*

My new attorney sent a realtor over to assess the house, etc and put it on the market. Sharon's plumber friend agreed to use his truck to help with the move. In exchange, I gave him the large freezer sitting empty in the garage. We had bought it in Virginia as part of some deal which involved periodic delivery of packaged meats – half a steer, I believe. A number of families signed up at the time, but now it was empty.

Mention of that freezer, though, reminds me of an episode that occurred not too long before the move: Corky, from the dairy farm, had called to say she saw someone enter the garage and steal something from the freezer. Upon hearing that, (the) middle daughter took off in a flash and soon returned, dragging this young boy by the scruff of his neck. In his hand was holding a small package of abalone – the only thing in that freezer. He looked terrified.

I found the scene disturbing – my daughter looking triumphant in her capture. Then, the police had come – probably summoned by Corky. It just seemed overkill to me – all over some Mexican clams. I wondered about this middle daughter of mine – hard as nails.

I don't recall the move very much, but a memory lingers on Saturn (Boulevard): How a loose fixture in the wall had caused the drapes to sag in the middle; my lacking the energy to climb up there and straighten them back up; how the back yard needed tending – the fruit trees, thankfully, still dormant. No kids or helpful neighbors lending a hand on upkeep.

Someone had seen my middle son hitch-hiking – eventually wending his way back to Florida – nothing really to keep him in California. I recall this feeling of despair overwhelming me in my inability to hold house and family together

– along with the stigma of “being on the dole”. Yet, in spite of such upheaval, I couldn’t wait to leave that place on Saturn.

My youngest son, though, was most affected by the move. He didn’t want to leave the place he called home and hated the prospect of moving into “low-cost housing”! He was so inconsolable, I was forced to assure him the move was temporary. For close to a year, he held me to my word, marking each day on the calendar as a reminder. Eventually, he stopped; but to this day, I sense his lingering resentment – not so much in losing the home but never having had the chance to “know” his father.

*Note: It wasn’t until he became an adult that my son finally made contact with his father. Maybe the how and where about this came about and how I was drawn (reluctantly) into it, may be address later on.*

## Chapter 97: A Prelude to Extreme Change

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In the divorce papers, only two dependents were noted under my care; but welfare, ironically, included the third -- regardless of age, it mattered not, though, as my ex didn't see fit to come across with the (*measly*) \$100 per month allotted to those two dependents.

Anyway, this such arrangement was duly noted by my middle daughter – my life so fully devoid, it seemed, of anything resembling privacy! So one day she approached me with a proposition: Why don't I give her the money welfare gives me for her care so she can rent a place of her own. Laughable as that was, I did wonder if she mistook my ability to operate on a “shoestring” as meaning her take was pretty substantial.

## Chapter 98: A Pause to Reflect

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I do wonder sometimes if this (400 plus pages, so far) journaling of mine presents itself as one big whine. Why do I keep at it?

All I know is this need to keep at it as a testament to the past that I seem to be the last living witness. Maybe, too, it's in hopes my children will know me as a person, warts and all – not, as I often feel, a failed wife and mother.

It should be also noted that my vision will eventually fail, in spite of the monthly (medical) injections, so there's a need to keep writing while my memory holds up. Already, there's much I've forgotten that I wish to remember. And it all revolves around the man I married – husband and father; but a role furthers from what he ever cared to define himself. From what I gather, his second family fared no better, as he remained the puzzle with so many missing pieces. Maybe, in this journal, I might reveal some of those missing pieces, or not.

Before moving on, however, there's the matter of the divorce to be reckoned with. I'm not sure what procedure, if any, was required in Okinawa, but for me, it meant a trip to the courthouse downtown. My lawyer (*and Peggy's*) would have notified me of the date and time to show up.

Never having been divorced before, I imagined a certain decorum was expected when appearing in court before a judge. So, I got out the handy three-piece outfit last worn at my youngest daughter's first communion. With Sharon driving – and Peggy along for extra support – we three entered the courthouse and were soon joined by my lawyer, who remarked on our well-dressed appearance.

However, the expectation that I would enter the courtroom with my little entourage for support was soon dashed. When called, I would enter to face what awaited alone.

In my mind, I imagined an atmosphere of solemnity, not rows of benches filled with mostly young women; the room buzzing with chatter much like a scene at the mall with the gals in short shorts and tight tee-shirts milling about.

In front, was an elevated platform, and soon, the judge appeared from a side door to take his place up there; seated behind a desk. The room then growing quiet as the judge called out a name from a sheaf of papers in his hand.

One by one, as a name was called, a gal would walk up, the words “Divorce Granted” (*or words to that effect*) would be uttered, and she’d turn to leave – sometimes giving a thumbs-up sign as her flip flops made a mad dash out the door.

My appearance and exit, though, was not so swift: When my name was called, I then made my overly dressed appearance before the judge (*Imagining a snicker or two from the gallery*) and looked up at him in anticipation. From the corner of my eye, though, a figure appeared from a side door and approached the judge. Leaning in, he began softly conferring with him on some matter, and it went on and on as I struggled to maintain composure.

Eventually, he left and the judge, back to his sheaf of papers, barely glanced at me before uttering the words, “Divorce granted”. With that, I forced myself to turn and make a dignified exit. And so, was added yet another stop on my forward trips to “every drug store in the country” – a repeat reference to my ex’s often snide reminders of my profound ignorance of most things.

## Chapter 99: The Irony of Happenstance

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When we were newly settled into the house on Saturn, a neighbor came calling with a petition in hand. A plan was in the works, it seemed, to construct a low-cost housing complex in the area. The petition was to gather signatures in opposition to such a plan in fear it would lower property values – the over-riding concern being it would attract the sort of people involved in criminal activity.

Surprisingly, my husband did express the view that poor people also deserved a place to live, but he signed the petition nevertheless (*wives signatures were not required*).

And so, here I was, newly settled into Vista La Rosa, that beehive of aforementioned criminal activity – a place I would spend 27 years of my life before moving on.

There were, of course, rules in place for being a welfare recipient. For those of sound mind and body, a system was in place to provide the tools necessary for finding employment. So, I was directed to a place downtown near the college, where I was to join others to begin a curriculum in job preparedness.

However, it was determined that those of a certain age, like myself, would need a refresher course – most certainly having forgotten those long ago four years of high school. So, essentially, we had to earn a G.E.D.

I'd befriended another gal my age, Mattie, the lone black in the group. She was highly intelligent and did not lack job experience, which made me wonder what misfortune landed her here. I was most pleased that Mattie and I earned the highest marks in our own G.E.D. studies, though one such mark didn't sit well with

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either of the two instructors – since retired school teachers; who seemed to relish in tending this unpolished flock of ne'er-do-wells.

Anyway, I'd written an assigned essay on some subject long since forgotten, and the teacher, though obliged to grade me accordingly with an A also added a scattering of question marks. Surely, I must have copied that essay was the message!

Soon, though, my growing disdain for these plump, heavily rouged ladies would reach its zenith:

One morning as we gathered round for the daily routine there was a change in plans: Without explanation, we were herded outside and lined up accordingly. Once in place, we were advised that a group of newcomers would be arriving and we should be especially welcoming.

In the distance, a large vehicle could be seen approaching, then come to a stop. The driver then opened the passenger door and a stream of young women exited.

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All, as our instructor excitedly explained, newly arrived from Vietnam. Then, with a sweep of her arm in our direction, she grandly announced, “and these are our welfare ladies.”

Ah, the irony of ironies! Such was my encounter of the strangest kind. My mind couldn't help but drift to Okinawa where my ex-husband was now encamped with his pregnant (*soon-to-be*) new wife – she, as he so once intoned, of that “marvelous slant-eye” variety.

Though I don't recall much more regarding the arrival of those Vietnamese women, I assume, they were there to learn English – their status far more respected than those of us “on the dole”.

## Chapter 100: The Mailroom Follies

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It became obvious that the particular school where I had acquired the G.E.D. worked in tandem with the local hospitals. Those who completed certain courses were utilized by said hospital to fill certain jobs less desired by others and at much lower wages.

One job was operating room cleanup – handling hazardous waste, scrubbing blood-strewn floors, etc.

Surprisingly, a number of school attendees were on their second go around, having grown bored with the previous job. It was a revolving door for some of the young gals who saw the training school as a respite from the 9-to-5 work.

Not so for one young girl I met: She was a single mom with an infant who had just completed the course and was immediately assigned at work at the hospital – one of the less desired ones: the night shift at the ICU. Where she sat in front of computer screens

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monitoring vital signs, etc.

Her father would take over caring for the baby while she worked but had to leave for his job when she returned home from hers. This meant trying to catch some sleep while tending to the daily routine with the baby, household chores, etcetera. She was young, exhausted, stuck in a low-paying job and of course deserted by the baby's father period there were many such stories.

And then there was me, a long-in-the-tooth 50-year-old, entering a completely new phase in life for which I was ill-equipped. Nonetheless, I was assigned to begin job training in the mailroom at the Chula Vista Hospital.

There were three women working there; Doris, the one in charge and my supervisor; A young girl who was often on the road delivering items such as X-rays to outlying doctors' offices and seemingly hostile young

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black girl who threw daggers at me from the onset.

In fact, her overall nasty demeanor became so unnerving, I finally expressed my concern to the other two women, whose explanation caused me to laugh out loud: she actually feared I was there to steal her job!!

That she had nothing to fear sure played out as I struggled to keep up with the running of that mailroom. My failing vision was surely tested in trying to decipher things such as weight numbers on the package machines, the amount of extra postage needed on overweight letters, etc. The mailroom, in essence provided free postage to the doctors and staff members, as well. There was also mail coming in, such as X-rays and medical reports from outlying doctor's offices.

Sometimes I was assigned the task of delivering said X-rays and reports to various offices in the building – such assignments being most unnerving!!

It wasn't a large hospital, but for one with directional problems, it was a nerve-wracking experience. All in all, that young black gal had nothing to fear as the mailroom was the last place on earth I wanted to be.

Yet there was another aspect to my presence in the mail room that had nothing to do with mail. For some reason, I was privy to whatever was coming down the pipeline in terms of gossip or outright confession. The young black girl, I was informed, was the go-to person for buying drugs.

To backtrack, though, it should be noted that the Black Rights movement was beginning to form and our black gal had a dedicated advocate – one of the staff doctors, Caucasian, who took our young gal under his wing. (*not, it seems, aware of her drug dealing*). He often popped in to smother her with attention and support, much to her advantage.

Yet, criminal activity wasn't limited to the drug dealing gal. The young gal who drove around delivering X-rays and such had no qualms discussing her law-breaking quirks with me.

When her car broke down, she arranged to have it towed, or whatever, to Tijuana, then reported it stolen. Somehow, she got reimbursed through her insurance policy and free to buy another car.

Then she related how her husband woke one morning to find his car had a flat tire, so he went through the still dark parking lot looking for a matching tire. Removing that one, he replaced it with the flat one and then drove off on four wheels.

I was also privileged to the sexual romps of those in various departments, one in particular involving a gal and one of the medical techs. Said gal regaling one and all by quoting the techs breathless words, "*was it as good*

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*as it was for me?"*

Doris, my boss, had a boyfriend who'd pop in now and then for some hot and heavy PDA. Not only were no words that ever exchanged between them during such hot and heavy encounters, I was left pretending to be heavily occupied in something or the other – which is why I was completely shocked when Doris approached me one upcoming weekend with an unbelievable invitation.

She and her boyfriend, the one she neglected to introduce me to were headed for a weekend camping trip in the mountains. She then went on to explain how she knew this great guy she was sure I'd like and would I be interested in making it a foursome camp out ... or words to that effect.

Caught completely off guard, all sorts of scenarios played in my head involving the protocol of camping out with a complete stranger

It just blew my mind, period. Of course, I had no intention of accepting such an invite; any more than others, I encountered:

One girl I met had described meeting a visiting attorney who was in town for a seminar of sorts. He and his fellow attorneys had rented a yacht for the weekend and would appreciate some female company. In all instances, I suppose, it was always up to the gal how far such encounters would go, but I joined the game much too late.

*Note: Even now I try to imagine how that camping trip would have evolved. Would we all have shared one tent? Not likely! Did Doris assume that I was a “player”? If so, I was one damned good actress!*

Eventually my time expired at the mailroom and there were no more work experiences, but I continued my exploration of all these endless drug stores.

## Chapter 101: Introspection

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I recall a famous actress being interviewed in which she revealed her one constant fear that people would eventually come to realize it was all only a facade.

While still living on Saturn Blvd. my young daughter was the last to be attending grade school and I became involved in the PTA. Surprisingly, I was delegated to a role having to do with health and well-being of the students – quite a feat for a mother on welfare, a heavy smoker and one who hoisted a glass of wine now and then.

Furthermore, when the PTA president was about to retire, my daughter's teacher approached and begged me to apply for the position. Though I had no interest in such a thing, the fact they actually believed me qualified for the position was rather stunning.

In truth, I was so often bewildered by others such perceptions of me,

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I wondered if I too was merely A facade.

If so, it got me through those 23 plus years at Vista La Rosa, the low-cost housing complex that would constitute whatever memories my family would carry of so-called “home”.

Whenever I pause to reflect on such things, it is because I still carry the burden of guilt – even if unjustified. This journal, I suppose, is a way of resolving that guilt by revealing every bit of myself I can ring out – especially in terms of my less than stellar acts of courage: As in the words of a long-ago popular song: *“I bet those boots walk all over me.”*

Finally, though, I did muster the courage to perform the one over-due act that would cost me dearly: I began the process that would lead to the dissolution of my marriage, only after years of emotional and physical abuse – this in the form of forced sex via that ever-present gun.

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Yet, my contribution to all the chaos in the marriage must be addressed for was based on downright ignorance – my then husband's snide references to my visiting every drugstore in the country not without merit:

When I was preparing to get married, I had no idea what to expect once the hoopla was over with and I was honeymoon bound. So, I turned to the one friend with all the answers, or more to the point, the one most experienced in dealing with men – good old Eleanor.

But when I asked her point-blank what to expect on the honeymoon – her sexual knowledge certainly exceeding my virginal one, she, now a proper wife and mother to merely responded that I should have a towel handy, unwilling to engage it any further.

So, like many young virgins like myself, I embarked on a honeymoon totally ignorant of what to expect. That it was a disaster probably set the tone for all that was to follow.

The biggest setback was the lack of communication – neither expressing a damn word to each other as we struggled to figure out the mechanics of it all. His offhand mention of having a larger than normal erection; then, lack of concern as I cried out and God-awful pain as he penetrated me – or rather tried to. Maybe the overall trauma is what caused my period to arrive ahead of time, resulting in my return home with my virginity still intact.

I once read an article about tribal customs practiced it deep in the African jungle. One involved the forced circumcision of young girls. I wondered at the time what exactly was circumcised and what the purpose. It took years to learn the answer.

Sometimes, while staying at a motel or apartment with thin walls, my husband and I would lie awake listening to the sounds of sexual activity coming through the walls – especially the sound of female shrieks. I'd smiled to myself, recalling a time I was out hanging the wash and listening to a couple of gals laughing over the one tenant who would pretend to scream with joy during sex in order to make her husband feel like Tarzan... But was it pretense?

And truth all those years ago, women didn't reveal much about such matters beyond satisfying the sexual needs of the men, especially – after long deployments. I recall when Archie Bunker became famous and how it opened the door to all those things never dared mentioned in public.

In one episode, “Dingbat”, the wife, dared to confess that she actually enjoyed sex with Archie – causing him to break out in a sweat, fearful if he didn't

keep performing, she'd seek it elsewhere.

That show and others that followed dared open up subjects long ago kept “under the rug”, so to speak. The women's movement, especially, opening up a dialogue regarding women's sexual needs – and that they too, can experienced the same sexual fulfillment as men. It was through learning how that was possible, I was able to figure out the tribal custom of circumcising those young women.

Until then, I had never heard of the term orgasm (*the Big O*) and by definition, realized that those shrieks behind the walls were real – at least for the lucky ones

In fact, the location of said spot to achieve the Big O was so random, I'm amazed that these tribal masters could find it – that being my original thought. Nonetheless, the term orgasm was unheard of in my time, and it would

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have been difficult for those lucky to experience such joy to describe a “thing” with no name.

Mostly, though, the expression “*slam bam thank you ma'am*” left no time to explore that elusive “spot”, wherever it was. In fact, this came up a few times in discussions with women in Al Anon – that that unfulfilled feeling.

And so it was as my then husband's drinking progressed, he sensed my unfulfillment and acted accordingly – he took what he wanted. That I was unable to achieve that elusive finale, though, was no excuse for the physical and emotional abuse.

In truth, being drunk is no excuse for rape. Possibly, for our children's sake, I've hesitated revealing all of this. Yet, why should I, the victim, feel the need to smooth the waters.

## Chapter 102: Homeward Bound – Part I

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There's no doubt my ex kept in constant contact with his mother while in exile in Okinawa; and, she, in turn, would have paved the way for his return home with her unwavering edict – “Peace at any price.”

I admit to grudging sympathy for the second wife, as she was welcomed into the fold, fresh with the sweet scent of lotus blossoms and enduring promises. In time, of course, the luster would fade, as evidenced by that very last call from Meme seeking my help while her son was in intensive care – the second wife totally undone.

Nonetheless, if the second wife lost favor, my ex's return home suffered no consequences – sort of like that wayward son in the Bible. In terms of comparison, my own journey home was far less satisfying. In fact, it was again opening the door to that same House of Horrors, and I the unwelcome intruder.

I don't know what prompted my decision to make that one last journey – unfinished business, maybe. Granted, my mother did call now and then throughout the years, searching, no doubt, for some tidbit to incorporate in her daily round of fictional tales to spread about. I truly believe my mother lived in the truth of her perpetual lies.

One such call still lingers in my memory in terms of its callousness: Although I was always I always took pains to maintain privacy on my end of those calls, she concluded that my role as a mother was being thoroughly wasted on demanding children. In essence, I should abandon them and come take care of her.

Obviously, she had no clue of my overwhelming bitterness toward her, and I was appalled in her belief that I should favor her over my own children. Yet, the more I progress in writing this journal, the more truths are revealed. With both my mother and husband, there was always that overwhelming

insistence that everything be about them.

I, of course, in the throes of romance, had confided all there was to my new husband, much to my regret. For years to come, he would derive great satisfaction in using the attack words, “You're just like your mother”! *(If so, he'd be squashed like a bug!)*

As for the trip back to the island, I – of course – couldn't afford the round-trip ticket. Still, being “on the dole”, as it were, but never ever having asked my mother for financial assistance, I decided to ask her to provide the ticket.

*Note, there's no doubt many Islanders had enjoyed the benefit of her largesse when in need but haven't help it any she deemed ungrateful.*

*In fact, following her death, my brother was disgusted by one discovery in my mother's bank transactions. A check made out to some ditzy niece for the sum of \$100 which she (the niece) held until news of my mother's death, whereupon she dashed it to the bank to cash it.*

Anyway, I called my brother to announce my decision to make the trip and to have him speak to my mother about providing the plane fare. I also planned on bringing my youngest daughter with me. In truth, although the tickets were forthcoming, no mention was ever made regarding who actually paid for them, it mattered not, as I knew I would never ever return to the island – even upon my parents death. This trip would be it.

Given the complexities of my life, it was always understood that my brother would be our parents caretaker – an undertaking he willingly accepted, though often causing turbulence in his own family. Yet our parents had no idea the grace bestowed upon them by a dutiful son. My mother especially would consider it her due.

## Chapter 103: Homeward Bound – Part II

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As I write this, it was 41 years ago that I stood on the deck of the ferry heading back to the island. The last time I had been on it, it held the casket of my grandmother, and my then husband and children were with me. This time it was just my young daughter and I.

However, we were not alone as my brother and his family had come along to sort of pave the way. In fact, after my brother met us at the airport in New Haven, my daughter and I spent a few days visiting them before we all piled in the car and headed for New London to catch the morning ferry to the island.

It's all of that sketchy. Now's the time when we were all together and then when my brother and family departed for home, I recall asking if my niece could stay behind to keep my daughter company. This in case things got dicey between me and my parents.

At first, Art's wife, Alice, was not pleased with the idea and that upset me. I was already feeling anxious and mistook Alice's hesitation as a sign of distrust. Then I replayed our time visiting them and how the kids had parts to play while both parents worked. Losing Renee would put a burden on the older brother, especially keeping tabs on the "mischievous" younger boy. So, when Alice relented, I was truly grateful.

My first memory was standing in the driveway of the house and coming face to face with my dad. He'd come out that same old kitchen door and stood waiting as Art maneuvered the car up that old familiar road, skirting the now bulging rock smack in the middle of it ...but more of that rock later.

As I stared at my dad's sullen face, his look telling me to back off from any physical contact. His demeanor that of a man whose life had been wrung out of him.

Struggling to connect with him, I remarked about the stand of trees now blocking the view of the neighbor's house – the place I had spent all those long ago times with the Lamb boys; how we'd gather around the piano while the old grandfather – a long retired minister – would pound away on the out of tune keys as we sang old church hymns.

Unlike my mother's housekeeping standards, the boy's parents were laid back; breakfast dishes only cleared away to make room for lunch, etc. The rooms were dark and sparsely finished, but there was always an air of utter calmness. (*The Lambs though, were now long gone*).

Mistaking my notice of the trees as some sort of criticism, my dad went on to into a mini tirade in defense of the right to privacy – a display of hostility that never wavered during my (*overlong*) visit.

Breaking the ice. My brother walked past to say my mother was

in a tizzy over being unable to get the walker through the kitchen door, so I headed for that encounter.

There she stood, her heavy-set body hunched over the Walker. She was wearing a tent-like dress; an open sore visible on each swollen lower leg. Her eyes, cold and piercing, also were devoid of warmth. Then my brother walked in carrying a case of soda for the kids long day in the sun, and the sight inspired her first words to me:

Watching his retreating figure, she shook her head in disgust, remarking that in that familiar high-pitched tone how much he spoiled those kids – far too much. My mind immediately harked back to that long ago phone call when she stated I leave my demanding children and come take care of her. So, here she was again, revealing her long held assumption that my brother and I place loyalty to her above that of our own children. Spoil her, not them.

During that long day, my brother took the time to drive me around the island – to my old haunts. One notable drive was a return to the peninsula – now fully electrified, with clean running water for all.

One stop, almost unchanged, was the house where we lived all those years ago. When I saw the sandy yard, I did wonder if it was the same sand, just shuffled about like flour and a bowl – remnants of us buried below. If I were someone just visiting – not someone heavy with unhappy memories – I would have thought that strip of land a lovely spot with its trees rolling, sand dunes (*and*) a peaceful inlet running through it, etc.

For some reason, I thought of Earl Evans, my childhood pal; the fort we built in the woods and how he was the only one to visit me when I had contagious impetigo. In later years, also the one who tried to talk me out of marrying my future husband.

At day's end, after watching my brother, Alice and the boys head down that “protruding rock road” on the way to catch the last ferry, I heard my mother's sigh and loudly proclaim, “Thank God they're finally gone!”, totally dismissing all that grace bestowed upon her.

I spent my first night in my old room upstairs, the girls the one once occupied by my parents. I would no longer hear the trains coming through New London – the sound echoing across the river, because, to my shock and surprise, the engines were now silent. While waiting for the ferry I was shocked when a train pulled up behind me – the train itself now a sleek gray phantom, moving fog-like along the tracks. And then I wondered if the foghorns too, were also silenced. (*All now digital*).

In my (*unending*) state of high anxiety, I sadly unmindful of our orderly rooms, the fresh sheets

and scrubbed, cleaned bathroom.

My mother couldn't climb the stairs, but no doubt kept up a steady stream of instructions to my worn-out dad upstairs. After all, this was always the way from as far back as we three minions did her bidding. (*Flashback to the spotless house she took credit for.*)

However, if I now feel sad regret for not thanking my dad for his appreciated effort, given that every word or gesture on my part was met with suspicion, he would have misconstrued my words as implying I expected otherwise:

However, if my presence in that house were to be described, it would be as an unwelcome one that must be tolerated. In order to compensate for that inconvenience, I chose to concentrate on my mother – to be her “minion” and offer my service. In whatever household help she required, even unfortunately

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if it meant butting heads with (*sigh!*) my father.

But before I dove, headfirst into that quagmire, I had an encounter that revealed the shocking truth of the wheels my mother had set in motion prior to my even setting foot on that island – the place as much my rightful home as hers.

With the girls securing their little nest upstairs, Renee guiding my daughter through familiar turf, I set off to head down to the village below; always a beehive of activity in the summertime.

There'd be the large building, housing the post office and the Fisher Island Farm – the seat of all the business activity related to the island. The place my mother planned to install me following secretarial school. There'd be two grocery stores in full operation. The larger one where I got my first real job after graduation. How my mother took a big chunk of each paycheck for room and board

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given her devious mind. It was also smugly meant to secure (that) there was never enough to finance my getaway.

There were cars parked here and there and people milling about. In the summer, given the increased population of tourists, a lot of workers commuted from the mainland to take on the extra jobs the locals couldn't handle. This included construction work on the summer homes, which lay dormant all winter. These workers were always odious, given their attire and what I always realized as a sort of colloquial accent.

I didn't pay much attention as three such guys headed my way. But instead of passing, they stopped directly in front of me and began to address me in conversation. I had no idea who they were, but they sure as hell knew who I was. The gist of it was to offer me a reasonable price to remove that protruding rock from the middle of my parent's driveway.

What comes to mind now is a sci-fi show once so popular on TV called *The Twilight Zone*. Each week a story was presented that went beyond the limits of human understanding (*My favorite, in fact, was the airline passenger who saw, as the plane was in flight, a tiny creature perched on the wing*).

As I stood there listening to these guys discussing a Project costing in terms of thousands, I felt myself entering that *Twilight Zone*. Right now, of course, there's humor in the fact that these guys were discussing high finance with a person who had \$20 in her wallet and a card entitling her to welfare benefits.

At the time, though, I felt such a surge of anger welling up inside me toward my mother (*Yes, verging on hate*), for this was her doing. Fanning the flames, she was, even before my plane landed. By the time I was on the ferry, she probably knew

what I was wearing. (*In previous entries, I spoke of those island drums. They were not a figment of my imagination.*)

In truth, such encounters were to plague me throughout my stay (*In this one, I said not a word: just walked away*). If T-shirts were in vogue back then, I envisioned wearing one proclaiming a big bold letters: *“I'm on the dole and can't afford Malibu!”*.

Anyway, back to offering my ‘minion’ services: yes, I could be of terrific help, it turns out, if I could put a dent in all the stuff stored in that small space upstairs. I'd peek in once, recognizing a few items from a long ago past strewn amongst piles of this and that. So, with my mother downstairs and me above, I began digging like a zealous Tomb Raider.

There were piles of soiled bed pads – relics from past stints in the hospital – alcohol related. Surprisingly my

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mother recognized item after item I called out and then hauled downstairs and out onto the patio.

Once, opening a paper bag tossed in a corner, I withdrew a balled-up dress which unraveled, I immediately recognized as the one she wore to my wedding (*my mind then going back to her ritualistic rolling up of my spent school clothes*). Then, spotting a shoebox amongst the litter. I suppressed anger when the contents revealed a collection of all the pictures I sent of the children throughout the years. The only picks on the fireplace mantle those of my brother's children.

One most familiar item was the clothes hamper – the tell all hiding place for the stolen bottles of leftover liquor my mother periodically brought home – which often, when consumed, led to those threatened drives off the pier. Amazingly, still in the hamper, or a slew of such empties. (*Back then it was feared if such were thrown*

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*away, the garbage men. – gossips all – would spill the beans on Sophie).*

So, on that hot day, as I dragged item after item down the stairs and onto the patio, I left behind those aforementioned items. However, I was not about to bask in the glow of my thoughtfulness, because my father drove up and all hell broke loose. Again, it was all about those esteemed garbage men; this in regard to just how much garbage they're required to collect. As he directed his tirade against me, my mother said not a word; yet, come mourning, the fruits of my labor were piled up awaiting pickup. When the truck arrived, I looked out and saw my dad's flailing arms and his and the garbage man's eyes directed up at me standing at the window. *(I now surmise that the Malibu dark daughter was expected to offer at least a substantial tip.)*

Note the more I write of this final trip to what's loosely called home

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I imagine a scenario where I was able to pick up the three of us and escape that damn place; but, of course, that being an island, one couldn't escape on a whim. When it came to battle, my mother was always a fearsome adversary, which is why from an early age, I became a skilled survivor, rather than a warrior. Besides, the best was yet to come.

## Chapter 104: High Hopes Gone Astray

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I'm wondering if that final trip to the island will fill more pages than that of my marriage. Somehow, it all seems connected – as in putting an end to things.

Once when I returned from a short walk, and my niece whispered that granny and grandpa had a loud argument while I was gone. I just shrugged my shoulders. However, when my mother waylaid me and (*oh so humbly*) apologized for the girls overhearing she and my dad “*exchanging words*”, I had to laugh and dared remind her that I grew up listening to she and dad “*exchanging words*” on a regular basis. Holding my breath, I awaited the expected outburst, but she just turned and walked away – planning, no doubt, some future revenge for my back talk.

Every morning, my mother called in an order to the local grocery store, a case of. Beer topping the list period throughout the day both parents would

heartily consume can after can. Then, as explained to me by my sister-in-law, Alice, my mother would perform the “evening ritual”:

Placing the saved cans of beer in a small wastebasket, which she covered with a dish towel, my mother then settled in her appointed chair in the living room before the TV to sip and watch.

*Note: And that's how, several years later, my dad found her: the TV still on, her glasses still intact, my mother sitting upright, a half can of beer clutched in her hand. Terrified at the sight of her, my dad went running to those once ignored neighbors, screaming that his wife was dead.*

Another ‘ritual’ my mother performed throughout the years whenever I paid a dutiful visit ,was to hand me a wad of dollar bills, mouthing those all familiar words, “Here”. “Why don't you take your dear old dad to the Pequot House

and treat him to a brew or two”. I always hated those staged encounters with her but knew better than to refuse – risking an acid-filled reaction.

I always wondered her intent, though, but came to believe it was her way of “smoothing the waters” after filling my dad's head with evil tales about his daughter. Nonetheless, this being my determined last visit to so-called “home”, I relented.

I have a dim memory of standing at the Pequot Bar with my dad – a space separated from the main dining area where, we gals, alone, or with dates, would sit and observe the macho boys drinking and telling tall tales. (*My dad's, the put-upon ones of a suffered life with my mother*).

Looking back, I regret never once thinking to hand those wadded bills to my dad, offering him the dignity of

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paying his own way (*That's the thing with rituals, I guess*). Nonetheless, my dad was content to just wordlessly drink his beer, almost oblivious to where he was. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a most familiar figure, heading our way from the dining area, and all hell broke loose. But first, a back story:

Back when I was a young girl, living with my grandmother down in the cove, there was an Italian family living in a white house overlooking the cove. I'd befriended the bit older boys, Dante and Dino, and we often went bike riding together.

As the years passed the boys became regulars at my parents home, especially when my mother gave one of her "all you can eat and drink parties". Dante and Dino were then grown men, but I always held a special place in their hearts, even though their teasing ways could become rather annoying

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if Dante, especially, had ingested too much fruit of the vine. (*In later years, their sister would marry my Uncle John*).

Anyway, I immediately recognized Dante's still handsome Italian face but felt a cold chill when he didn't return my welcoming smile. Instead, his face shone dark anger as he verbally attacked me. How dare I, he demanded, bring my dad here to the Pequot House to buy him drinks, knowing it could kill him?!!

Shocked, my mind filled with visions of my dad reaching into the fridge for yet another can of beer, keeping pace with my mother's intake. As I watched Dante's angry, retreating figure, and without a word to my dad, (*now that was odd*) I began to feel like that book title, *A Stranger in a Strange Land*. But as things escalated, I became more like the pariah of biblical fame.

Once, when entering the kitchen, I saw a familiar figure sitting at the table – drawn, as in bygone times, to those expressive eyes. It was Demi, the long-suffering wife of the man whose apartment I once rented before my grandmother sent my uncle to vacate us (*two children – one a newborn*) from the place. (*In a previous general entry.*)

Although he was a scoundrel, Demi was of a sweet nature whose company I valued and, I'm sure the feeling was mutual. (Also spoken of in a previous journal). How, each with a baby, we would hop in the car to shop, head for the beach, etc., or just sit drinking tea – her eyes so peacefully cast, no matter what turmoil inside her period

And so, I called out her name, those eyes warming up with recognition, then fade, as my mother's strident voice proclaimed: “She doesn't know you!!”

Undaunted, I tried again to reach out to Demi, only to be silenced as my mother's voice now reaching a fever pitch, recited those same warning words. Glancing at Demi, I sensed her discomfort (*or mortal fear*) as she shrunk down in her chair, so thought it best I just exit the room.

No doubt, I probably walked in while my mother was filling poor Demi's ears with whatever misery my visit was bestowing on her – Demi, another victim trapped in my mother's web. No doubt, anyone reading this would wonder how someone such as my mother could get away with such impunity. Well, she did – her whole life – going back to when she was a young girl caught writing lies to *True Confession* magazine. (*As related to me by my aunts*).

Yet, As I looked at her body, now swollen from the rigors of drink, it didn't seem that long ago that she sashayed out that kitchen door

golf bag slung over her shoulder – those good-looking high school seniors fresh from the Korean War – following closely behind.

In truth, when it came to dealing with the opposite sex, my mother far surpassed me in terms of experience. In later years, following my divorce, when other single women would expand on the subject of flirting, of sending out vibes, etc. in the pursuit of attracting males, such talk was foreign to me.

In fact, visions of my mother would spring to mind; how, clad in a revealing lacy nightgown, she would subject my dates to a flirtatious display, or, how at ease she was entertaining that male contingent who showed up when my dad worked nights.

Actually, when I later watched that movie, *The Graduate*, thoughts of my mother sprang to mind.

## Chapter 105: The Cove

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During that final visit to the island, there were those times when I could slip away from that gloominess of “home” to enjoy the light of friendly faces and to ease right into where our last conversations left off. The good, bad or ugly.

Such meetings took place at the bottom of the road, either because no-one dared risk that protruding rock, or had been banished by my mother. Such a one was Ray (Auralia), a girl whose father forced her to leave school when she turned 16 – this because it’s what was done in the old country.

For a time, Ray and my mother had a longer friendship than most, though it disturbed me when my mother would call and speak of Ray’s serious drinking problem (*the pot calling (the) kettle black, etc.*). “Can you imagine”, she’d say, that Ray needs a drink first thing in the morning?”

Sadly, when Ray and I got together, signs of her illness were evident as she began a rambling discourse on things of then and now!

Her being forced to quit school at the (*most tender*) age of 16, in order to work and help fill the coffer – an Italian tradition upheld by a domineering father, then fulfilling that duty, how she spent her first pay check on a coveted black dress, only to warrant a slap in the face from her mother for daring to wear it. In Italy, only old women (*like her mother*) and prostitutes wore black.

As she rehashed it all, my memory went back to the time she met Otis newly out of uniform; their courtship, with Otis weathering Ray's mom chaperoning them at each meet in the living room – another Italian tradition.

*Note: Ray's older brother, a husband and father, returned home from the war, completely blind from battle injuries.*

Newly married, Ray and Otis moved into one of the other duplexes in the cove and we became neighbors. They were so happy back then. I recall Ray beaming as she described how Otis would tell her each day – how beautiful she was.

Yet, here was Ray now, confiding to me how Otis cheated on her – a betrayal happening in a long-ago time in Alaska – during World War II. Was it something unearthed, or a long-ago confession dredged up in an alcoholic memory? In reprisal, she confided in having a secret lover in trysts on the mainland – an alcoholic fantasy, no doubt.

On a happier note (*or so*) Ray drove us up that steep hill to the radar station where my husband-to-be shot down that lovely hawk, just to show me its sharp talons and feel its still warm body (*ah, I was so starry-eyed back then*).

Sadly, a few months following my return to California, came word that Ray had died from the effects of alcoholism.

One day my cousin Cookie picked me up and we drove to her and Kenny's new home a short distance from the cove and mostly financed by the summer folks Kenny had long worked for. It was a pretty place nestled in the trees – the location purposely chosen by Cookie who wanted a change from her life-long view of water.

During our conversation (*Kenny, who said a brief hello, was his usual quiet self, retreating to another room*), Cookie surprised me by exclaiming how lucky I was that my mother was still alive (*Aunt Rose, hers, had died years earlier*) – as if we both had had rather ordinary mother/daughter relationships.

My relationship with Uncle Bill and Aunt Rose – Cookies parents – began before Cookie was born. My earliest memory, when I was living with my grandmother down in the cove, came when they took me to spend time with

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them at the estate where they both worked – a place, I believe we locals called “The Far End” of the island. It’s where the mansions, etc., owned by the summer people were located.

My Aunt and Uncle lived in the caretaker’s wing and sometimes Aunt Rose’s sister would join us (*her name escapes me even though I was very fond of her and we did meet again on my final trip to the island*). Anyway, I loved it there and had the run of acres of land. As previously mentioned, it’s where Uncle Bill would whistle and a flock of turkeys would rise up from the brush.

Anyway, that was the good times. Eventually, when Cookie and her brother were born, the family resided down in the cove in one side of the duplex that Uncle Bill now owned. (*the other side could have been rented out in the summer for a substantial amount; but it was now home to Aunt Mel & 3 kids*).

As time passed, Aunt Rose’s drinking got worse & worse. Even now I can recall her coming

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home along the path that was once a short cut out of the cove (*now since swallowed up by plant growth*), one arm linked through that of some old geezer she'd picked up along the way; the other clutching a jug of wine.

I also recall a time when Uncle Bill came rushing into Granny's waving a piece of paper at her; then remembering she couldn't read, thrusting it at me. He couldn't tell if Rose was drunk, but suspected she was – whereby she obligingly provided a sample. But still not sure, he then sought my input, but I had none. His obsession kept pace with Aunt Rose's drinking – which didn't falter when Cookie's brother was born. Yet, neither did his love for Aunt Rose ever falter. Amid the worry & frustration, he remained devoted to her.

*Note: Relevant update RE Cookie:*

In a recent phone chat with my brother in CT., he broached the subject of Cookie. Given all the hi tech modes of communication these

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days, people seem to express themselves more openly – like a giant sounding board. According to my brother, Art, Cookie is sounding off about her previous life down in the cove, how she hoped never to go down there again.

Not that was interesting; more so when Art asked if I was aware of Uncle Bill taking baths with young Cookie. Well, I certainly was, but never ceased to be amazed at the memories/observations my younger brother retained.

It was during the time the family of three (*Cookies' brother hadn't yet been born*) had settled into the duplex down in the cove, the rooms were small & the bathroom was located off the kitchen. There were times when I would walk into the kitchen, the bathroom door wide open, and observe Uncle Bill in the tub with little Cookie – she facing him.

Although Uncle Bill would be chatting away, I never dared venture

anywhere near that open door ---fearful of a close-up look. In fact, as I laughingly told my brother, I didn't see a naked man 'til my honeymoon.

It's possible Uncle Bill was a pioneer in the "*au natural*" that is so trendy these days. Besides, given the history of my marriage, I tend to shy away from the touchy/feely aspect of such things.

On the other hand, while talking to my brother, another memory Re. Cookie surfaced: As the oldest grandchild, I became the official baby sitter for the young cousins -- usually not a bother with the lure of plentiful snacks -- except when it came to little Cookie:

Before the family of three moved to the cove, if called on to baby sit, I would spend the night as they lived much further away -- each time an experience I'd come to dread.

It was always predictable: Cookie certainly would have been aware as she took in the familiar sight of her parents preparing for departure, but made not a sound. Then, as soon as the car pulled away, came the first wail. It was amazing how she could keep it up, even as I tucked her in for the night, joining her as darkness fell.

There'd be moments when she'd pause, as if to catch her breath; but then, oblivious to my very presence, the wails would go on. It was as if there was no there there, just the sound... Now & then, she'd fall asleep, then wake with a start, and begin again—until the blessed return of her parents... One last memory is of Cookie waking up & commencing to wail & my relief upon seeing both parents enter the room—which soon turned to panic at the sight of Aunt Rose standing there naked as a “*Jay Bird*” (*old time saying*). Thankfully, Uncle Bill was not “*au natural*”.

Keep in mind that I was pretty young myself—still in grade school—my own traumas yet to come when I left what was to me the security of the cove.

However, given the fact that Cookie was to witness a daughter become the first local to marry into one of the island's wealthiest summer families, still didn't erase those pesty childhood traumas...they're part of our DNA.

## Chapter 106: The Last is not the Best – Part I

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One day the girls and I walked down that long road to the cove to visit Aunt Mel – about the last of those long-ago tenants. I wondered what it was like to be alone down there with all those memories of stilled voices.

Yet, being blind, she seemed content with the familiar – though no longer having access to that now overgrown path leading out. Cookie, of course, was close by up there in the woods, along with Uncle Ed, etc. And then, she had that #1 lifeline essential to ALL islanders – the phone.

To escape the heat, we sat outside in what still remained the high point of that small duplex – an abundant area thick with grass. Then, like a blast from the past, my eye caught sight of a familiar figure sauntering our way – his skinny limbs unchanged: it was

Corbin Hedge, the one-armed fisherman's son.

Somewhere, back in the journal I spoke of Corbin – his familiar presence when I lived at Granny's. Some thought him rather odd, but from an early age, I trusted him completely – though few words ever passed between us. To coin an Italian phrase, we had a "*simpatico*" relationship.

When I moved to the peninsula, he would somehow show up when I'd be walking along the beach on the far side – his row boat beached on the sandy strip across from Granny's house – and silently join me, of course, words did pass between us, but limited in scope.

Anyway, here was Corbin approaching, the fingers of one hand securely clutched in the jaws of a rather large flounder, still glistening wet in the sun.

“This,” he said, extending it out to me, “is for you.” Then, placing my gift on the grass, he hunkered down beside our little group. In typical Corbin fashion, he mostly listened & observed; until, as if in answer to some internal clock, he stood up, gave me a wave, and sauntered away.

Later, as the girls and I made our way up that steep hill, passing the golf course and ocean beyond; then, stepping over that jutting rock, did it hit me: I’d left Corbin’s fish behind, baking in the hot sun!

As soon as I entered the house, I grabbed the phone & called Aunt Mel, profusely apologetic, as I confessed to leaving a rotting fish on her lawn. My mother, listening in, was irate that I deprived her the opportunity of preparing a freshly caught flounder for the evening meal, and so I earned yet another black mark. *Note: Even now, I feel the guilt in regards to both Corbin and my mother.*

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During my visit to Aunt Mel's I took time to visit the white house overlooking the cove, the one where Donté and Dino once lived, but now occupied by Uncle John and his wife, Messina. Actually, it would be the 1<sup>st</sup> time I ever stepped inside the door – such entry not uncommon, as mentioned in the beginning of this journal – my only access to most homes was in visits to friends or in baby sitting surely, not that mass crowd at my shower.

The interior was dark and rather gloomy, but did afford me the opportunity to view the whole of the cove & out lying water – but the Hedge's view from further up would have taken in even more – if you dared the colony of cats!

When I laid eyes on Uncle John, though, huddled in a chair, he seemed beyond caring for such a view, maybe way back, when he and Messina were finally able to unite in marriage – kept apart by Granny's refusal to accept a divorced

daughter-in-law, they relished their new-found happiness.

Sadly, those times were long gone and Uncle John seemed to be slipping away. Though Messina tried to coax his memory, he couldn't grasp my connection to him.

*Note: As with Ray, I later received word that Uncle John had passed away – his poor health later compromised by Parkinson's disease.*

On my next to last day on the island, I followed the road from the house, which led directly to a remembered rocky beach – not ideal for sun bathing, but a lovely view of the Atlantic, none the less. Surprisingly, the space was filled by a number of colorful beach chairs—which, on closer inspection, were occupied by members of the island's senior citizens – mostly female.

Then I spotted a familiar face in the group as she scurried about tending to her flock. It was Pat Baker – the newly designated island nurse –

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replacing the formidable “*Nurse Chase*” – my ever-lasting nemesis.

Back in high school, I often suspected she was hired by my mother to trail after me, in her capacity as school nurse, in order to catch me not wearing that ugly new pair of eyeglasses (*my mother also had a pair of ugly glasses, which she hid from view*). Actually, all glasses back then were ugly & we girls, forced to wear them, glammed them up a bit with bright nail polish.

Pat & I immediately made eye contact and she came right over and, as in previous encounters with the locals, her first words were as if little time had passed when she spoke of the sad loss of my baby son – an event which had happened so many years ago.

Then, after a bit of small talk, she surprised me by stating matter of factly, with a shrug of her shoulders, that every Xmas, she sent

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my mother a case of beer.

I felt it was her way of stating her knowledge of the obvious – no beating about the bush. It would have been a relief to open up about such things, but I really didn't know Pat all that much – certainly not enough to reveal that Pandora's Box. Best to keep the lid on. And so I went on my way.

## Chapter: 107: The State Trooper: Part II

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I knew Uncle Ed was in poor health – in fact, I was told he awaited word when a bed would be available for him at the mainland hospital – signaling a long stay. Yet, he seemed unchanged to me – mentally & physically. Maybe that's why I chose not to broach the subject of his health – I wanted him to remain in my mind the same old Uncle Ed – that out-going personality, his sense of humor, etc.; and yes, his life-long love of beer.

Yet, one encounter with Uncle Ed did disturb me: when he was younger, feeling his oats, his drinking could get out of hand. There was the time when three of us – my husband & I (*newly-wed*) and Uncle Ed were at Renauds, the local drinking hole/restaurant, Uncle Ed downing beer after beer. Then, mesmerized, I watched as his

body, slithering like a snake, disappeared under the booth.

We somehow untangled him from under there; and I, finding no humor in my uncle's antics, declared it was time to leave. Deciding it best I get in the back seat of our small car, making it easy for Uncle Ed to exit from the front one, we took off.

Uncle Ed, however, decided he was not ready to leave; and in a flash, had opened the door and was headed out. As I watched my husband grab hold of him in the nick of time, I yelled out, in frustration and anger, words that would lay stored in a drunken mind, and emerge many years later: "Don't hold him back...I don't give a damn if he's left in a heap on the road!" or words to that effect.

When word came that Uncle Ed's room was ready, family and friends gathered at he and Aunt Trudy's new home – located on what was once a thriving army base. I recall Uncle Ed standing beside me; and, in a boastful manner, asking what I thought of his uncle owning a home “*right there on Officer's Row.*”

I recall how awesome those quarters had looked lined up on the main road leading into the base – one narrow road to the right leading to the married enlisted quarters, where my Aunt Mel once resided with Uncle John Zito – the future officer who deserted her.

My mind flashed back to the time during WWII when the base – and whole island—was brimming with personnel from all branches of the military. I don't recall many so-called army brats attending school. But a couple stand out: One a rather defiant Jewish girl – the only such member of that group to set foot on our red neck

sands. We students were fascinated, especially by the rather large Star of David she proudly displayed throughout her stay.

The other student was the son of a high-ranking officer whose stay was rather memorable: He was the only member of that elite group who invited a select group of us to attend a party right there on Officers' Row.

So, in reply to my uncle's question, I described attending that party; and, as now, standing on this same porch within view of the movie theatre across the street, and parade ground in the distance.  
*(And here stood I, the ex wife of one of those so-called elites!)*

Then, as if to throw cold water on a sweet moment, he turned to me – a half smile on his face, and asked if I recalled the time I was all for letting him fall out of a car & left behind in the street.

I couldn't believe that he would resurrect such a thing that happened when I was a young newlywed of nineteen – and he an older uncle by ten or so years. Yet, he waiting 30 years to reveal what had been stuck in his caw all that time.

I was crushed and mumbled how I was just worn out back then from putting up with my mother's (*his older sister's!*)\_drunken antics. Of course, I hadn't a clue back then of my own stored memories to come.

I recall one foggy evening Uncle and I as we stood outside listening to the sound of a small plane circling overhead, looking for an opening in the so-called “pea soup.” After many tries, the plan turned back. No doubt it was one of the summer crowd – a husband and father hoping to grab a weekend before returning to the grind.

If it was a Friday, he would have

missed that designated cocktail hour, hosted by alternate members of the summer colony.

When the ferrying service, first started, few locals could afford the convenience Uncle Ted, though, the free-spending, ladies' man & perpetual bachelor – also a dedicated beer drinker, was one of the first to utilize such service.

I recall Uncle Ed, ironically, answering the phone at Granny's house – possibly from the pilot himself – claiming he'd been hired by Uncle Ted to ferry him home to the island. The caller, however, warned that Ted was "*feeling pretty good*" (*drunk*) & to dispatch someone to the airport for immediate escort off the plane.

Curious as all get out; I hopped in the car with Ed, prepared to enjoy the spectacle. Sure enough, the minute the cockpit door opened, Uncle Ted tumbled out into the arms of his brother – and to the relief of the pilot, crazy enough to fly him!

Anyway, that episode came to mind in the wake of Uncle Ed's damning memory. What then, if Uncle Ted decided, mid-flight, he didn't want to be air borne – instead, grabbing the cockpit door prepared to exit? The pilot, of course, would have interfered – drunks always expecting to be accommodated in such a way.

Aside from such episodes, all the uncles were my childhood guardians – the ones my husband snidely referred to as “*the fishermen*”. No doubt he was jealous of that connection – adding just another bit of calamity to the marriage.

*And so enters the Trooper*

At some point during the evening, I left the porch to sit down on the bottom step, possibly to smoke a cigarette and take in a last view. The theatre across the way was showing a war time movie – which, to the girls' disappointment, I deemed too violent for them to see. It was the one

about the Vietnam War.

In the distance, was the parade grounds – where, during wartime, we’d put on our pretty cotton dresses and head to the army base to enjoy the Sunday afternoon marching band. *Note: the parade grounds also served as the landing strip for the LTA’s (Lighter than Air Blimps) & their spectacular landings – hands reaching for the trailing ropes to guide them in.*

We’d gather in the gazebo – a long-standing structure, which shielded us from both sun & rain. To the right of the gazebo, stood alone dwelling commonly referred to as “*the General’s Quarters.*” – The General, himself, forever unseen by me, at least.

Presently, the state trooper now occupied those quarters – a presence only required during the summer months, to handle the overflow of visitors, though I don’t recall much criminal activity of note throughout the years.

A lifeguard was also dispatched – a rather cushy job for both hires. *Note: one lifeguard did make waves (pun), though, when – after a summer’s display of his hunky body – word got around that he was heading for Hollywood.*

Then came word that he has actually in an upcoming movie to be shown at the army base. Naturally, we all flocked to see our “hunk” on the big screen to our dismay, if you blinked, you missed him. *Note: He did rescue me once from the clutches of a huge wave.*

As I reminisced, a figure emerged from those quarters, his tall frame heading in my direction. No doubt this was the trooper come to bid Uncle Ed good wishes. As mentioned in an earlier entry, Ed had a tendency to draw people to him, and most certainly this close neighbor.

As the trooper drew closer, I noticed he wasn’t “*life-guard-younger*” looking – his crabby face verging on 50. Then, to my

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surprise, he sat down beside me; then, staring straight ahead, -- not bothering to introduce himself, he solemnly spoke these words:

“Why don’t you, “he intoned, “send your poor dad the money he needs so he can retire?”

Then, rising up with nary a backward glance, his lengthy frame ambled – John Wayne style – back to his quarters.

Even now, I can almost feel the heat that rose in my body as he uttered those words. As for those behind me, I wondered if they were watching the encounter – or pretending not to – curious as to its purpose. Turning, though, rather than a sea of faces, there was only my Dad’s pale, woe-begone one, staring into space.

That trooper, sworn to uphold law and order, had – no doubt – succumbed to the clucking hens at the grocery store, or the beer-fueled chatter at the Pequot Bar. Somehow, throughout my stay. I’d gained the dubious distinction of being Sofie’s rich bitch

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daughter from Malibu (*save for the previously mentioned few*).. my mother, my enemy.

It was now getting dark, & not eager to cram into the truck - given my Dad's erratic driving, the girls and I elected to walk home. I wanted to take the side road bordering the ocean for once last look, but the girls deemed it too spooky – electing to follow the well-lit sidewalks. I had to laugh, given that the street lamps were only recently installed; we islanders long-used to prowling the dark like jungle animals.

Entering the house, as the girls immediately headed upstairs, I glanced at my mother, leaning heavily on the walker, & sensed an unease about here. Then, clearing her throat, she blurted out that there'd been a phone call. What followed was a disjointed explanation of how she thought the caller was her estranged brother, Ed (my Uncle Ed).

However, in her befuddled state, she suddenly realized the call was for me, and the caller was my old friend, Earl Evans. (See pages 29 & 437). But, that realization only came after she'd slammed down the phone.

What a fitting end to a shitty day, I thought. Here was a lost opportunity to connect with that one true friend & she stole it from me. How, I wondered, could she think it was her brother Ed, yet know it was Earl Evans.

*Note: I'm sure he wasn't on the island, but those "drums" – often referred to – had probably reached him on the mainland. My mother, of course, was covering her tracks in case he called back – unlikely, given that slammed down phone.*

So, I just stood there, staring at her, wishing to God I could pity that bloated body, ravished by drink. But I did feel sadness, maybe earning me a tiny bit of grace. Then I headed upstairs to spend

one last night in a place I hoped never to return.

The next morning we gathered in the kitchen, suitcases ready, waiting for my dad to back the truck into the yard. Somehow he stepped too hard on the gas, ramming the truck into the picnic table – installed there by my brother to accommodate the family on summer visits.

Luckily, no damage was done, but I hoped that karma or such would protect us from being driven off the pier – finally achieving my mother’s long-threatened finale to herself. My only recollection of our departure, though, was rather bitter sweet: As I reached in the bed of the truck to remove our luggage, I unveiled a six-pack of beer tucked in a corner – my mother’s old trick; my dad, looking sheepish, as his eyes met mine, said- in almost a whisper, that “*the doc*” told him it was okay if he treated himself to a can or two a day – au revoir, Dad.

## Chapter 108: Epilogue

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Rather than rewrite the final two pages regarding the state trooper chapter, I must correct an error in the sequence of time.

The girls and I, in fact, did not leave that following morning. My intention, I suppose, was to add more spark to the narrative. In fact, it was Uncle Ed who first boarded that ferry, heading to the bed awaiting him at the hospital – sadly, a trip from which he would never return.

Actually, I have no memory of the day or two that remained of our stay — my movements propelled by anger over that missed call. Given that Earl never made a follow-up call (?) made me suspect my mother's rambling account. As always, she was spared my anger – in fact, went to her grave unaware of how deep that anger was rooted, -- earning me, again, a "*bit*" of saving grace ---- or not!

## Chapter 109: The Final Goodbye

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Cousin, Mary Anne, met us at the pier in New London. It's strange how memory works; for what comes immediately to mind, is pulling into a drive-in and my cousin loading up on French fries, burgers, & Coke (*sadly lacking on the island*) and to inhale that mouth-watering aroma as we continued on our way.

The plan was to stay with Mary Anne and husband, Tony, while we waited for my brother to come fetch us. My only recollection is driving to the hospital with Mary Anne for my one precious visit with Uncle Ed before heading back to Calif.

It should be noted that for many years now, Mary Anne had become sort of the bulwark of the family. Not having children of her own, she took on the role of mother hen for those in need – including myself

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at times. In that capacity, though, she could be a bit zealous in judging what's best in certain situations. And so it was as we stood outside Uncle Ed's hospital room:

Mary Anne, of course, had been there from the moment Ed had settled in, which no doubt accounted for her insisting that I dare not so much as give him a hug – such a gesture sure to bring on tears.

Well, fresh from the ordeal of coping with my mother, I didn't take kindly to my cousin's (*well-meaning*) advice. Just this once, I wanted to stand my ground & do what suits me. This was my uncle, this would be our last time together, and so be it if we both ended up in sweet good-bye tears.

Yet, when the time came, after running out of cheerful banter, I knew I couldn't risk those tears, so made a clumsy retreat – for Mary Anne's sake!!

None the less, I vowed to make up for that crude exit by returning to what had once been most familiar: From the time my uncle joined the army, I took it upon myself to engage in a letter writing campaign in hopes of boosting his spirit, or whatever...

So, as soon as I returned to Calif., I began a similar campaign – a steady flow of humorous, typed letters that would bring a smile to his face as each arrived at his bedside.

As time passed, though, he didn't get better. I was told that a cancer specialist from an esteemed hospital in Boston, Mass. was even consulted, but to no avail. After a long struggle, Uncle Ed passed away. Even now, I picture him stepping out on the porch, standing tall as he admired the panoramic view – the King of Officers Row...

## Chapter 110: After Thoughts

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These first letters to Uncle Ed probably led to my becoming a rather zealous letter writer – though not necessarily a good one, none the less, it's what propelled me as a young wife to use such letters as a kind of romantic gesture.

Whenever my new husband was slated for deployment, I'd compose a bit of sweet prose to tuck into his duffle bag or shirt pocket, then I'd imagine his smiling surprise as he sat back to relish my every word.

Never once, though, did he ever acknowledge those letters – that being so not his style – or rather the one he'd invented for himself. It was also in accordance with his declaration to never expect a bouquet of flowers from him, but rather a solitary rose...etc., etc.,

I'd read not too long ago, in fact, that the brain wasn't fully

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developed until the age of 21. Although he was five years older, neither of us had yet advanced beyond the mentality of junior high schoolers.

None the less, before the drinking progressed, we often experienced the rosy glow of shared intimacy – this in spite of the often troubling need to ask myself, “Is this all there is?” Yet, all that really mattered was my knowing that he was satisfied.

Yet, all the warning signs were there from the beginning – that episode atop the hill at the radar station when he raced from the car to upchuck the beer. Then, newly wed, how he consumed over the limit and decided we’d pay my mother a visit. Having confided all my troubling life with her, I was now paying the price in the fruits of his drunken glee as he raced the car up the road & dragged me to the kitchen door.

It was my first inkling that he

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rather enjoyed exposing my Achilles heel – especially since it distracted from his.

My mother, of course, (*and surprisingly sober*) showed suitable displeasure, no doubt thinking “See, you should have chosen the secretarial school!”

And so I mark this episode as the first inkling of the ying yank pattern of the marriage. Somehow it lasted way beyond its expiration date, only because I couldn’t relinquish those high hopes.

## Chapter 111: Journeys End: Part I

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Those 27 years in Vista La Rosa constituted a big chunk of my life – much time spent trailing after single gals to places far beyond those post offices sneeringly referenced by my ex husband...yet, unlike the pursed lip rejection of the church ladies, or the suspicious glares of the smugly married on Saturn Blvd. – and yes, the astonished priest brain washed by a meal at the officer's club, the single gals – to coin a phrase, had no axes to grind:

To those looking to hook up, I most definitely was an anomaly. Yet, their awareness that I was no competition, allowed for comfortable friendships to evolve. In fact, it was with married Sharon that I engaged in some pretty daring exploits, such as visiting a sex shop conveniently located next door to our country

western hang out, Sharon asking far too many questions of the obliging clerk.

That all my gal friends had cars certainly enabled me to get around. I once dragged a sexually active neighbor to a grunion run at the local beach – something I'd always wanted to witness. Her interest in this feat of nature was of a different sort as she bemoaned the lack of eligible males. It was as if she sought the scent of testosterone around every corner.

It was she, though, who borrowed her latest boyfriend's camper and took us on a daring trip to Tijuana. This gal, though, knew people of all ilks, and we spent the days in the comfort of a friend's home and the nights in the camper.

It was also my first experience sharing a beach with horseback riders, leading their mounts around throngs

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of sun bathers, bringing to mind those beaches in India shared with sacred cows.

Looking back on such escapades, it was as if I'd undergone a delayed spring break. There was really no joy in any of it – just a need to get away from four walls, and scowling, judgmental kids. Besides, given that I was no spring chicken around this time, I was probably viewed more as an endearing older sister.

On the other side of the coin was al-anon, where dealing with the one male figure in our lives was more than enough. I recall one gal taking my young daughter & I to a hockey game. Because our seats were high up in the bleachers, my attention was constantly diverted by the thought of falling head first as I wended my way down those myriad steps to the bottom. That also holds true for school graduations of a much lesser height.

My kinship with al-anon also led to my befriending a nice couple who were following the program and whose home I visited a few times. It was on one such visit that the wife – whose name I can't recall – took me aside and said she had something in mind she hoped I'd consider:

There was a family friend – a guy her husband knew from work – who was unattached and easy going. Already, my hackles were going up, but she asked if I would just hear her out.

I was still of an age where I should allow myself the chance for a meaningful relationship. All she asked is that I meet the guy, engage in a bit of small talk – test the water. She, of course, vouched for his integrity etc., then told me to go home and think about it.

Well, I honestly wished my well-meaning friend hadn't opened that can of worms, as I was

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quite content in maintaining the status quo – that is avoiding any meaningful relationship with the opposite sex. Yet, my earnest friend sort of piqued my curiosity:

What if there was the remotest possibility that I could connect with a thoroughly decent guy; or, more to the point, would he find me a worthwhile companion? On the dark side, though, what if my friend misjudged him, and it turned into a sexual pursuit?

In the end, though, all my musings were to no avail; as whatever seemed promising, went asunder: I have no recollection of how the gentleman & I came face to face for the first time, or how we ended up at my apartment.

What is seared in my memory, though, is the two of us sitting side by side on the sofa when the door opened & there stood my middle daughter with her date – her gaze transfixed

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on her mother in the company of a man.

What happened next was an act of sudden madness: grabbing hold of her young man's face, she proceeded to perform what could only be perceived as some deep tongued maneuver on the poor guy – aiming for shock value. After releasing him, she then turned with nary a glance in our direction, and strode down the hall to her room, mission accomplished!!!

Somehow, that vindictive performance was probably for the best: that guy I almost got to know was much too nice for the monsters in my space. Yet, I harbor no ill will for such an act; it being an example of the all-around hurt permeating the whole family – which weighs on me to this day. Yet, I will never regret ending the marriage.

## Chapter 112: Journeys End: Part II

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As I recently remarked to the one who will take possession of this wordy endeavor, it wasn't until I reached 70 plus years of age, that I finally felt I'd become my own person.

Until then, I mainly saw myself as an ex wife, a single mother, and someone dependent on welfare payments for survival – or, as my dad would prefer, “on the dole.”: Buit all that changed over 15 years ago in San Diego, where – thanks to an addendum my attorney attached to the divorce papers 30 years prior, I benefited from an act of congress entitling me a percentage of my ex's retirement money.

Before that, I'd become eligible to begin receiving social security benefits, including Medicare – this, above all, freeing me forever from the shackles of the welfare system.

Strange as it sounds, I actually felt exhilaration in filing my very first tax return – even to the extent of pretending to moan about paying Uncle Sam his due...I was now part of the mainstream.

That utopian life unfortunately, lasted a full six months, when my ex – getting the last laugh – up and died. None the less, that feeling of self-worth survives, even garnering respect from those who have no inkling of my past.

As for the past, I wish I'd been blessed with sturdier attributes – a strength of character able to be heard above the clamor of things, and unafraid of the consequences of my actions. It was this withholding, no doubt, that contributed to my struggle with “*the tremors*” – defined as a bodily symptom of emotional origin.

As mentioned earlier, the first tremor manifested itself in that little post office in Nestor, CA – the emotional origin, I believe, stemming from those first bounced checks back in East Rockaway – attributed to my then husband. From then on, any sort of paper work became my nemesis – the strain building up over the years. *Note: Even now, at age 90, lurks the fear those tremors will return – though they'd probably be viewed as old-age palsy.*

It's said when one reaches this ripe old age, that the time has come to shed all unpleasant memories – put the past, like those sleep dogs, to rest. However, that past also involves my now adult children, who were left adrift by what seemed a sudden end to the marriage those many years ago.. that they were blindsided, though, maybe attests to the fact that I kept trying to keep some semblance of normal.

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Even now, my mind goes back to those death bed words: “I was a rotten husband to both of my wives...It was all about me and money.” I can’t help but wonder if those were words of remorse, or rather pride in having gotten away with it.

There are so many things left out of this journal, because they were too harsh to describe. In many ways my ex husband sought to demoralize me in order to inflate his ego. I certainly brought my own bits of garbage into the marriage, but he covered a land fill. One example that comes to mind is the way he threw that plate of franks and beans against the wall, as if I’d served the equivalent of rat shit! This husband and father acting like some dime store despot.

I followed much too long my once-admired mother-in-law’s edict of “*peace at any price.*” Or, better yet, the

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tried & true one: *“The squeaky wheel gets all the grease.”*

Yet, here was a husband and father who would deprive a wife and children of enough money to buy food – simply because he enjoyed the feel of a cash-filled wallet. None the less, there is such sadness to it all: What drove him to act out in so many destructive ways – to crave things beyond his reach? Maybe the answer is there in the many pages of this long journal.

However, though I grant him that dollop of sadness, it does not erase those years of mental and physical abuse that clouded the marriage...Now that he's gone, maybe this journal is my way of being heard.

Jan. 1, 2022

As for the physical abuse, I no longer feel obligated to somehow still those troubled waters for the sake of others, since it remains an indelible scar in my memory.

## In Retrospect: 7/27/21

After completing 400+ pages of this journal, I did what I vowed not to do: I went back to the very first entry, knowing I'd immediately want to rewrite page after page.

Aside from the initial poor penmanship – which I corrected by switching to print, the process of revealing one's thoughts + feelings was akin to entering the confessional as a child. Consequently, these tentative opening chapters almost seem child-like – written in whispers.

## 3/26/2022: Afterthoughts on the 1<sup>st</sup> Day of Spring

1

In chapters in Part I there are passages regarding the engagement ring – how it came about, etc., and the episode with Aunt Til’s revelation of her financing its cost. In essence, that ring was a sham – an unpaid debt.

Then, many yrs. later, another ring surfaced (p.34) – this one, to my surprise, belonging to my mother.

The story behind this ring is something that still sticks in my craw – because it signifies the “*one true thing*” I can attribute to my mother – a sincere gesture of good will and actual pride in my oldest son’s accomplishment.

When I last visited her on the island, she showed me a book she’d ordered

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*(proof of her earnest interest)* which, supposedly contained names, biographies, etc. of P.H.D. candidates. But, to her dismay, offered little but a short bio. minus even a picture.

Later, when I returned home a small package arrived; inside, was a diamond ring that once belonged to my mother. In the note enclosed, she requested the ring be given to my son either to be sold to purchase college books, or whatever he decided. That he chose the “*whatever*” is what propels me to vent my feelings & leave my words to Larry’s discretion. *Note: I choose to leave them in this messy state as it matches my still-bitter feelings*

The “*presentation*” was so swift I barely recollect it. When my eldest son stopped by, I handed him the ring & my mother’s heartfelt (*I truly believe*) words. I can’t recall his reaction, if any, other than pocketing the ring and his seeming haste to leave.

Later, it was that son, himself, who informed me that he immediately headed for his young friend’s place – a couple we’d all befriended – and handed said ring to the young wife, proclaiming it in thanks for whatever sandwiches she often made for him... It just never entered his mind to tell me he had no need for a diamond ring and that maybe I might want said ring, considering it once belonged to my mother. (*No matter that I was also on welfare – which, no doubt, struck in his craw*).

Fast forward to years later when said son and his now wife

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came to visit. Sadly, they reported that the wife who had worn my mother's ring all these years had died of alcoholism. Her husband, though, had made a special trip to Neb. to return said ring, declaring (*rightfully so*) that it really belonged in this family.

For the 1<sup>st</sup> time, I actually allowed myself a close up look at this true unflawed diamond ring – which, when appraised, contained 26-30 tiny diamonds—at least! Said ring, I was told, would eventually go to my grand daughter.

As for my own (*flawed*) diamond ring, I sold it so my youngest son could take the entrance exams in hopes of entering the Air Force Academy.

## 5/23: Further Thoughts on Rings and Things

1

In writing about my mother's lost (*given away*) and found diamond ring, there was yet another ring I considered less noteworthy. Now, though – with my memory becoming less reliable, I feel it deserved mention. But first, some background:

After joining the (*esteemed*) Clemente family, I quickly learned to address my new mother-in-law in the more refined term, “*mother*” – my new husband having snorted at the lowly fishermen's use of the childish “*mommy*”.

*(Even today, my 80-yr.-old cousin still refers to her mother – my Aunt Mel, who lived to almost 104, as “mommy”). Note: I could have retorted*

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*that Long Islanders, seemed to speak with the same accent as the Jews they so despised.*

As time passed, though, I was more comfortable adopting the grandchildren's less formal "Meem", which is how I will now refer to her.

One day, after I'd been long separated from my ex husband – her son -, I received a call from Meem. I assume it must have followed her rather serious heart attack, for she went on to explain how she was in the process of distributing her jewelry. But, first, a background note:

Among the many chats we had while I was living with her – before Lolita poisoned the air, Meem often spoke of the "Poker Girls"—cherished friends whose origin was long established

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but of whom I knew little – having learned early on, to tame my curiosity.

In one such “chat”, Meem told me how she had shared with “the girls” the story of how her husband, back when he obviously began to make money, would commemorate this or that by presenting her with a lovely piece of expensive jewelry.

As time passed, and the collection grew, Meem – being a thrifty sort – told him enough was enough, that he’d been more than generous, and it was time to stop. Which he did. And this was way before the mistress, the war, etc.

One can only imagine the collective gasp from the poker girls, each uttering “Barbara, you were a damn fool!” And so she probably was, (*in some ways, weren't we both dam fools?*)

Anyway, all that came to mind when Meem called. Strangely, I'd never seen – or asked to see – her jewelry collection. Perhaps, after being told that Dad's dresser drawers were off limits, I tended to so honor Meem's.

In truth, I never took notice of whatever jewelry Meem wore – diamonds, especially, not in the realm of my curiosity. After all the only “ice” we lowly fishermen recognized was that which blocked river traffic in the winter. (*I'm more attuned to crystals tinkling in the breeze*).

When Meem called, though, I'd probably already cashed in (*or would*) my only diamond – the ring – for something or other – even though Aunt Til had actually paid for it. To my surprise, Meem then informed me that she had set aside a piece of jewelry for me. It was,

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she said, a ring that her mother-in-law had long ago given her, -- that someone I once imagined to be that haughty, formidable Castilian Spanish grand dame (*that goes back to Aunt Edit's letter in response to my query re. the family's connection to royalty*). *Note: the mother-in-law was actually Irish; her married name Clemente (without the e) actually legit – if not royal. Note: Although there are no Polish dukes or French kings in my family tree, one Paquette aunt insisted a connection to the Great Lake Champlain. (Maybe most families like to imagine historical links to people of note).*

Anyway, my antenna went up when informed I would receive something once actually owned by that grand dame. It was not, Meem stressed, some expensive piece, but a

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pretty little thing encrusted with tiny stones – one missing, but easily replaced by a jeweler.

As promised, the ring arrived a few days later. It was so long ago, I barely recall what it actually looked like, other than its pleasing effect on me. There was its intricate design, the tiny stones, etc. It never dawned on me to get a magnifying glass and search inside the band for any inscription, etc. *Note: If I had done so, I like to imagine my delight in discerning a tiny crest resting atop a blooming hyacinth – my father-in-law's actual middle name. (The outcast's revenge – if such a ringer ever existed!)*

However, I decided to parade the ring around for a week or so to see how much attention it garnered. Actually, it was so admired, I feared becoming too

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attached to it.

So, as planned, I packaged the ring and sent it on to son, Bill. My intention – in a small way, was to make amends for my mother’s multi-diamond ring now resting on another’s finger, and gifting his wife with the one given to me.

After waiting a rather long time for some reply, I then called my son to see if “*the package*” had safely arrived -- his reply certainly not what I hoped for, but rather more in line with my oldest son’s lack of finesse:

I then listened as he laughingly described how, upon receipt of the ring, he placed it (*snug in its little box*) under Linda’s pillow. Then, per his instruction, she reached under her pillow, carefully opening the little box to see what nestled inside, then, her words said it all: “What the hell is this!”