

# Among Our Souvenirs

*A Collection  
of  
Cape Breton Poetry and Prose*

*from  
The Sydney Writing Circle*

*May 2008*

# Among Our Souvenirs

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## Foreword

The members of the Sydney Writing Circle are people with stories to tell. Some of their stories are recollections from their pasts and some are products of their vivid imaginations. Whatever the case, their stories are all worth reading.

**For the last nine months, I've met each Tuesday afternoon with these authors at the Southend Community Centre, in an Adult Learning Association of Cape Breton County (ALACBC) classroom. For two hours each week we have shared our writing with each other, worked on improving our vocabularies and writing skills and enjoyed each other's company. We are a diverse group. Our ages span close to 30 years and our backgrounds differ greatly. But our shared need to tell our stories binds us together.**

This is the second year that ALACBC has offered the Writing Circle program. In 2006-07, the Writing Circle was a special project offered with funding from the Nova Scotia Senior Citizens Secretariat. This past year, 2007-08, **the Circle became part of ALACBC's regular program offerings, showing the importance the organization attaches to adult learning.** On behalf of all the Writing Circle members, I would like to thank Karen Blair and Margaret Cooke for all the help and encouragement they have given us.

It has been a great honour for me to facilitate the activities of the Writing Circle for the past two years and to write along with the folks whose stories appear in the following pages. Thank you all.

Kathryn MacCuish

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Jack Compton:

*I, as an octogenarian, am eager to be an actual part of this senior writing circle. I began with trepidation 2 years ago and now am comfortable in the group, helped by my compatriots. I had suppressed my writing, beginning as a teenager many years ago. I was always an avid reader and when I came upon a new word I would look it up to enhance my vocabulary to include it in my writings. Now under the guidance of an amazing facilitator I am hopefully emerging as the writer and poet I would like to be.*

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### HEART OF THE MATTER

It's not the bat you wield as you stand at the plate,  
Nor is it the size of the batter,  
A genteel soul you await to enter Heaven's gate,  
It's all relative in the heart of the matter  
**It's the** gentleness and the strength you acquire,  
As you go thru life  
And as your days gather length  
You broaden your scope  
With life serving skills you learn to cope  
Your own managing style, you cut like a knife.

### AFTER ALL

After all these years, to have and to hold  
After all these years, safe haven from the cold  
That smile, that elfin grin, that furrow in the brow  
Together forever even better now  
Word of endearment spoken in a whisper  
Echoing down the flights of time  
Hanging on a deafening ear  
Still enchanting even yet sublime.

### THE LIKES OF US

The likes of me  
Could love the likes of you  
**I'll give you a love**  
That is pure and free  
Invite me into your heart  
Make the likes of me  
The likes of us till death do part  
A love story unending  
The likes of us  
Angelic voices blending  
The likes of us.

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### A VOICE FOR A SONG

This is a day for singing  
A day to rejoice  
To listen to music ringing  
From a clear lucid voice  
The trill of sweet notes soaring  
Like a warm embrace  
Punctuated by an appreciative roaring  
Sometime, someway, somehow in this space.

### FRIEND

**Don't walk in front of me**  
I might not follow  
**Don't walk behind me**  
I might not lead  
Walk beside me and be my friend.

### WHAT IS A MAN!

Throughout the ages  
Seers and sages  
Have asked what is a man  
Is it his bravado and self-assured manner  
Or is it his acclamation to plan  
His strength and achievements to expand  
To hold high the victorious banner  
To trump the mystery of our being  
Master of hearts and minds  
Our journey has begun  
As you feel the trickle of declines  
A shattering, a meager measure,  
A compassion, a tear  
A dent in the armour that you wear  
Be not afraid to say I have lived  
Forgive my shortcoming  
I am only a man.

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So what is a man, what has he got  
If not himself, he has not  
I took the blows and I stood tall  
I achieved my goals, my way  
After all.

### I AM THANKFUL

At the end of day at  
beside I kneel  
I am thankful

In the morning I arise  
to a new day I yield  
I am thankful.

Be it ever so to be alive  
and humble  
I am thankful

Given a hand up when ever  
I stumble  
I am thankful

Count the many blessings  
you are given  
I am thankful

To enhance the life you  
are living  
I am thankful

With all my faults  
you pardon me  
I am thankful

With clear true eyes  
it is I you see  
I am thankful.

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### THE CANSO CAUSEWAY

(CANADA JOINED CAPE BRETON AUG.13/55)

It was official – the opening of the Canso Causeway took place Aug.13, 1955. Amid the grandeur and spectacular – dignitaries – provincial and federal government figures – about 40,000 people gathered to celebrate the opening. 100 pipers clad in **resplendent kilts marched across the span playing “Road to the Isles”.** This was the culmination of the late Nova Scotia Premier Angus L. MacDonald. Unfortunately he died in April 1954, just months short of completion. That day his spirit was felt in **the hearts of the ceremonious people.** This poem “Dhutaich Fhein” translated “My Own Land” composed by Hilton McAully epitomizes Premier MacDonald and his into realizing his dream.

See that lone fog shrouded shieling  
On the bonny Breton shore  
Think of how you might have reached it  
In the trying days of yore  
The Canso tides were racy  
The ice was bitter hell  
But this has all been altered  
By the dreams of Angus L.  
He dreamed a hundred pipes  
Were marching four abreast  
All up and down a causeway  
Which linked the east and west  
Their kilts were Scotian tartan  
And the swirling pipes and shrill  
Told both of roaring Celts  
And the ripple of the rill  
With sweetest of all music  
His dream was not in vain  
**And the beloved “Mo Dhutaich Fhein”**  
He heard these notes, this dreamer  
And his dreams we must applaud  
**Tho’ no longer in his ald land is his home**  
But with his God.  
In tribute to his memory  
His dream is now complete  
And when the peer and poet  
To write with words replete

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The story of the Causeway  
And how it all befell  
Takes up his pen and paper  
Let silence for a spell  
For just a quiet moment  
Break in the noisy vein  
In tribute to his courage  
**He loved "Mo Dhutaich Fhein"**

Cape Breton is made up of many diverse and ethnic cultures, Scots, English, Italian, Polish, Ukrainian. It was separated from mainland Nova Scotia by the Strait of Canso, passage was by ferry. Travelers had to endure long waits, high winds and storms. In the late 1890's and early 1900's, Sydney was becoming an emerging economy, with the steel plant and coal mines. Government and citizenry were pushing for a permanent link – a bridge, tunnel or causeway for a long time period. Finally in 1951, after many years of negotiations, it was revealed by Premier Angus L. MacDonald that the Federal Government and Nova Scotia would build a causeway at a cost of 22 millions.

This announcement was met with skepticism as other plans had been shelved in the past.

Begun on May 15, 1952 using rock and fill from nearby Cape Porcupine, this permanent connection to mainland Nova Scotia and Canada was completed on Dec. 10, 1954.

The Feds, Provincial as well as the CNR worked jointly on this project. The highway was under Provincial responsibility, the railway under CNR and the Federal government saw to the construction of the canal and waterway. The Causeway was the deepest manmade structure in the world (at that time) 218 ft. depth, 4,300 ft span and 80 ft. wide.

Many stories have been related about the trials and tribulations in the construction, but there were only two fatalities.

Personally, after my many travels, when I approach the causeway, my heart is quickened, my spirit lifted because I know that I will again set my feet on "Cape Breton, my Cape Breton".

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### EDUCATING RHONDA

She gave a long quizzical gaze at herself reflected in the bureau mirror. She was approving of what she saw, casually dressed in a pair of white slacks that extended below her knees, topped by a black tee. With a fluff of her hand she poked at her long shoulder length blond hair.

Leaving the bedroom with an overnight suitcase in her hand she called out, "Gram I am leaving now". Momentarily a salt and peppered hair woman, nattily dressed came to the doorway, where her granddaughter stood.

"Rhonda," she said hesitantly, "I want to impress upon you to be careful when you are driving."

The girl smiled, "You know I will be, Gram."

The older woman took her hand, "Yes, I do – but the others you have to watch. This road rage and the rush to be getting somewhere, it's all too much to understand."

The girl loosened her hand and hugged her grandmother. "I'll be so careful – all that you taught me, the responsibility of the road – to be courteous to other motorists – I'll put that into my driving."

Rhonda moved to the door to exit to go to the small car waiting in the driveway.

Grandma stood looking at her. "You're so much like your mother – everyday a duplication of her – when she was your age – just nineteen."

Rhonda hesitated at the doorway. "I am glad I look like her right down to my aquiline nose". They both laughed. "I'll be careful. I am meeting Christine and Winnie at Winnie's house. We are going to Smooth Herman's. We will walking there as her house is only a block away. Her Mom and dad will be home all weekend. I told you all this before. We are best friends and want to celebrate Octoberfest together. I'll call you when I get there. Please don't worry, Gram.

You taught me what is the right thing to do. All your former pupils still admire you – as I do. I want to be like you. You are my mentor – my role model. I can't fail with you always there for me in my formative years."

Both the older woman and the lady on the threshold of womanhood – embraced. Rhonda turned, a tear trickling down her cheek. "I love you, Gram."

The she was gone, turning the key in the ignition and with a wave of her hand and a radiant smile drove down the driveway onto the road toward new adventures. Gram smiled and said, "She has it all together. She'll be alright. She's a work in progress pursuing her college education. I am so happy to have helped raise her

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while her Mom and Dad were away serving their country. Grandpa Joe Henry will be bringing in the pumpkins, we'll all celebrate at a grand meal Sunday."

She turned and went to meet her husband coming into the rear entrance, carrying several of the harvested pumpkins.

### PERSONAL ADVENTURE: ASCENT TO MATURITY

For as long as I can remember I wanted to be accepted and be loves for myself and my individuality. Growing up in the late 30's and thru the 40's I was basically quiet, very shy and reserved. I was the fourth child, the second male in the family of eight - a typically poor steelworker's family.

I continued my formal education immersed in my studies and was devoid of social attributes or skills. I was almost afraid of my own shadow, afraid to speak up or voice my opinion. My brother, three years my senior, was active in sports like hockey, baseball and was a runner – he excelled in these while very popular. I participated in skating, swimming, golf. I leaned toward the arts – writing poetry and short stories. I was almost ashamed to let people know that I was writing – it seems it was something a youngster did not do.

I progressed through senior high involved in spelling bees, when I succeeded I felt triumphant. My graduation prom where I was fixed up with a date gave me some faint heart that I would overcome my shyness.

I went to work – my first job was with the Dominion Coal Co. with the accounting dept. at the General Office. I felt a measure of self-esteem working with a sincere group – slowly the mantle of shyness seemed to be dissipating. I joined groups – a bowling team and became very active socially. I began my ascent to maturity. I took in the local dances at the Venetian Gardens – of a stop at the local tavern (the Helm) for a few pints of bravado. I realized that this false courage allowed me to invite the opposite sex for a dance.

With this new found maturity came responsibility. I learned to drive, bought a second-hand car. My popularity zoomed. I was chauffeur for my buddies transporting them to dances in the Northside (Yacht Club), New Waterford ( St. Anne's).

I enjoyed this new atmosphere. I was accepted, liked and I reveled in this surge of popularity and maturity. I upgraded myself, my education, taking courses in accounting, business, English and Communication. I always feared failure and wanted to be a success. I became more outgoing and offered my hand in friendship. My co-workers were accepting me. During my journey to maturity I dated a number of attractive young ladies.

Through the dance at the Venetian Gardens, I met the lady who would eventually

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marry me. I did not bowl her over with my manly charms. She was a marvelous dancer. I had to wait to get a dance with her – she was never without a partner.

At this time, I realized there was a transformation taking place in me. I felt secure, secure in my own skin. I realized I liked myself and I could like others – to offer my hand, my help to clubs, organizations, associations. My volunteerism began. Intermittently, after six years and numerous proposals, my dance partner consented to marry me. It was Christmas Eve, 1960.

I was ready for this journey. We had a June wedding.

I was now a husband who with this lady who professed to love me, put her future in my hands. My journey to maturity we took together. Nearly three years later I became a father - our only child, a much loved and wanted daughter was born.

The grand design – my destiny was fulfilled. We have had our share of heartaches, ill fortune, disappointments, but together we have weathered it. I contend that with my lady – my wife Rose at my side – I have matured to learn responsibility, to accept challenges, to be respectful, to be honest, to be humble and compassionate.

Now in our golden years we look back and assess our 46 years together mature in the knowledge that together with our strengths and weakness – giving to one another we have weathered the storms. We have gained a good sense of maturity.

### **STORM**

I walk the footsteps in my mind,  
Recalling imprints I have trod,  
Striving to recapture moments in time,  
An adrift spirit, answering only to God,  
From the dark recesses a faint glimmer

A seed to sprout, to grow and skimmer  
To hope again and perchance  
To be reborn of a yesteryear  
A faint remembrance  
To grasp, to hold, to covet  
Into the realm of lostness and regret.

Sharon Schaller:

*Two women have been my inspiration for writing. The first is my Mother, Rosella Jane Gordon Wolfe and the second is my daughter, Kathleen Rose Schaller. Both are gifted poets, and while I wrote poetry in my youth and teen years, now I prefer to write short stories. These gifted writers inspired me to try my hand at writing and so, after retiring from teaching, I joined this group to help me find the discipline to write. I am enclosing my favorite stories that I have written this year; not necessarily my best stories, but the ones that speak to who I am and how I feel. I hope you enjoy these stories, and through them, get a sense of who I am and what I love.*

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### LOUISE'S GREAT ADVENTURE

Louise pulled into the Canadian Tire Parking lot and peeled her hands from the steering wheel. She had made it! Louise had turned 60 last month, and was a smart, attractive woman, but this was the first time she had been to the new **Canadian Tire store, and she had been nervous driving here. Indeed, Louise didn't do much driving.** She had had her license since she was 17 and had renewed it each **year, but didn't drive very often or very far. Fred had done almost all of the driving.** He had taken her for groceries, to pay bills, and to Walmart whenever she **needed to go. But she rarely drove herself anywhere, only to the Doctor's office,** and occasionally to the hospital to visit a sick friend or relative. So the trip to Canadian Tire was a big deal to Louise.

Louise and Fred had been married for 37 years, and for almost all of those years, Louise had been at home, taking care of Fred and their two girls. She had been a good wife, mother and homemaker, and had been proud of herself. But she had not gone out much. She was very happy in her home. She had friends she talked to on the phone, and once a month these friends got together to do an afternoon of crafting and chatting. Louise also helped out at church, and was happy and fulfilled in her life. Most of her shopping was done from the Sears catalogue, and was delivered to the Sears outlet downtown. Fred, and then later the girls, would pick **up her parcels whenever she needed them to. And then, two years ago, Louise's daughter had taught her the convenience and fun of online shopping, and now she didn't even have to leave her house to get all manner of things delivered right to her door.** With on line banking, all her bills were paid from home too. So Louise had not gone out much on her own.

And then, two months before she turned 60, she lost her Fred. He had come home one Friday night, and calmly told her he was in love with someone else, and was leaving. The bimbo was only 45 and Louise was hurt and dismayed and a little terrified. Who would take care of her? How could she survive without Fred there to take her places, and do things with her? Who would she keep house for, cook and clean for? **Her girls had their own lives and families; she didn't want to interfere in their lives.** She was filled with panic.

She was depressed and heartbroken for about a week. Then she began to see that there was an upside to this after all. **She discovered that she didn't have to be home all the time. She didn't have to cook supper each night, at least not a full three course meal with fresh dessert.** She could make a small meal, and one evening even went out with her crafting friends for a tea at Tim Horton's. **That was so much fun! She hadn't gone before, because Fred had wanted her home with him when he came home from work.** Someone had to be there to fetch him his beers and snacks and Louise had been happy to do it, but now she was free. Yes, free! That was what it felt like.

She had come to Canadian Tire today to get a new set of taps for the bathroom. The old set had been leaking for at least two years, and Fred had promised to

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replace them many times in the last two years, but he had been a procrastinator. Now, Louise decided she would do it herself. She had watched the home repair shows on TV and was sure she knew how to do it. Anyway, she had a dandy household repair book at home that she had ordered from the shopping channel, and was looking forward to replacing the taps herself. The only problem was getting the taps.

Louise sat in her car and stared at the doors to the Canadian Tire store. She was just checking to see which set of doors were the entrance. She watched the people coming in and out, and filled with anticipation and excitement, she got out of her car and entered the store.

At first she was a little dismayed; it seemed so big and confusing, but there was a nice young man with a headphone set in his ear, standing in the center of the aisle, so she went up to him and politely asked him where she could find bathroom sink taps. He smiled at the timid lady and realized her fear and confusion, and **something else he couldn't quite name. He pointed out the way and told her the aisle number, and as she made her way further into the bowels of the store, he realized it was her determination that had impressed him. He phoned ahead to the plumbing department so they would be on the lookout for her.**

Louise arrived at the plumbing department a bit dazed; there had been so much to see. The salesperson who greeted her was very helpful and took the time to explain the different kinds of taps, and how she could put them in. He helped her get all the fittings and odds and ends she would need, and then walked her to the checkouts. Louise was thrilled. She paid for her purchases, collected her Canadian Tire money, and headed back to her car. That hadn't been so bad, and she had seen so many things she couldn't wait to go back and just poke around. If she got along well with these taps, she would replace the tub taps as well. Louise was getting excited as she made plans to come back to the store – maybe next week. Louise got into her car and sat and smiled. She was going to be okay. She didn't need Fred. She could take care of herself, and as she started the car and headed for the exit, she felt like she was embarking on a whole new adventure – the adventure of life.

### I REMEMBER

I was thirteen years old in November, 1963. I was in Grade 9 at Woodill Junior High and for the most part, I remember very little of my Grade 9 year and almost nothing of that November. I didn't like the month of November, because I always found it cold, damp, dark and dreary. It was just a month to get through so you could get to December and Christmas. So why do I remember that particular day? It was November 22, and an event happened that would change me forever in a way I could not have foreseen.

In those days, those of us who lived "in the shipyard" and beyond, took a bus to

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and from school. Not the typical school busses of today, but just a regular city bus, dedicated to the duty of taking students to and from school. The poor drivers had their hands full with us noisy, active junior high kids. We would yell and throw things, and when the bus was full, stand in the aisles and sway back and forth as the bus "hurtled" around corners and came to a stop. It was loud and chaotic, but I was used to it, and didn't really mind it.

It was my desire, every day, to try to be the first on the bus after school. To that end, the minute the bell rang, I would move as quickly as I could, without running in class of course, to grab my bookbag, scoot to my locker and grab my jacket and lunch box and then walk as fast as I could to the door. Once outside, I would make a beeline to the bus and arrive breathless at the door eager to enter and grab the coveted front seat of the bus, so I could avoid the abyss of the back seats. I would also give a cursory glance to see who the driver was. Some of our drivers were nice, some were cranky.

This particular day, I was pleased to see it was my favorite driver. All the kids liked this guy, he always had a smile on his face, and a joke for us. However, this day he had his head down, and there was no smile to greet us. As we pushed and shoved our way to enter the bus, we got a better look him and noticed to our shock, tears streaming down his face. The radio was on, but we didn't hear what was being said. Our attention was riveted to the face of our bus driver. He looked up and in a voice filled with anguish he muttered, "President Kennedy has been shot." Immediately, everyone stopped in their tracks. Those at the back of the line asked what had happened, and as word filtered back, everyone fell silent. We all filed silently on the bus and took our seats. No one spoke. Even the wild and wooly teenaged boys, who loved to yell, swear and throw things, sat silent. It was a quiet ride home, the man on the radio telling what had happened, and us sitting there listening. The only sounds beside the radio, were the sounds of quiet sobbing and sniffling.

That day and that moment when I heard of JFK being shot and killed has remained with me ever since. In a way, it was the end of innocence and childhood. Before that, I had lived in a kind of cocoon of the love and safety of my parents and family. But it must be a dangerous and scary world, indeed, if someone could and would shoot the president of the United States. I wouldn't say I knew much about him, but he was a world leader and even he wasn't safe. That afternoon, and for the next few days, I was glued to the television as I watched the events unfolding. I marveled that I could see things that were happening thousands of miles away, at home in my living room. I mourned the loss of the president of our neighbour, and I discovered that I had an interest in what was happening in the world. Many years have come and gone since then, but I have never forgotten the moments on November 22, 1963, when I heard JFK had been shot.

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### ROSELLA'S GIFT

CHRISTMAS 1922

The little wooden house was buried in the woods. There were no streets or houses near. **The path led from the house down the hill to The King's Road. The path was** dark and spooky and had been given the name the Black Road. The house was small, consisting of one main room and a small bedroom on the main floor, with a loft above where the children slept. A little ladder led to the loft. The outhouse was out back and was a fair bit away from the house.

Mama and Daddy were getting ready for Christmas, but Mama was worried because there was not much money and she had a big family. Daddy was a painter and made good money when he worked, but Daddy liked to drink and often when he got paid he would stop off to buy his mates a drink or so, and forget he had a wife and six children at home. Often he would arrive home with most, if not all, of his pay gone, and he in no condition to help around the home. Mama worked hard to keep house and look after all the children with little or no money.

There were six children living in that small house. Georgie was the oldest, he was sturdy, serious and tried to help Daddy whenever he could. Nellie was next. She was quiet, serious and beautiful and helped her mother look after the little ones. Next came Tommie - he was naughty and was always playing tricks on his brothers and sisters. Rosella was the middle child - a dreamer, a poet, always singing, dancing and acting and always active. Rosella was 7. Winnie was 3 and still almost a baby. Etta was the baby, though in the years to come, two more babies would join the family.

Now it was Christmas and things were tighter than ever. The children were so excited. Even though they were poor, they hoped Santa Claus would find the little **house in the woods and bring them something. They knew it wouldn't be much,** but that was okay. Georgie and Tommie had gone out back with Daddy to get the Christmas tree and the girls were busy helping Mama with the fruit cake and other **good things to eat. The turkey was ready for tomorrow. There wasn't much, but it** seemed like a feast. Rosella danced around the house, singing the carols she had learned in school. It was festive and warm with the fire from the chimney.

Soon it was time for sleep, and because it was Christmas Eve, the children had a hard time settling down, listening as they were for Santa and his reindeer. Finally, it was morning and all the children tumbled over one another trying to get down the ladder to see if Santa had come. Santa had come! There, sticking out of the stockings, were the gifts – a bright red pair of mitts that Mama had knitted secretly in the evenings when the children were asleep. But, not all the stockings had a gift. **There was the middle one, Rosella's, without a pair of mitts. Mama in her** hurry and fatigue, had forgotten to make a pair for Rosella. The little girl was heartbroken. She sobbed as though her little heart would break. Daddy felt so sad and sorry for the little girl, he took her in his lap and hugged her close. He told her

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Santa had forgotten her mitts at the North Pole, but had given him something for Daddy to give to Rosella. It was a 50 cent piece! He dug in his pocket for the coin and gave it solemnly to the little girl with the dark curls and chocolate eyes. She smiled through her tears and reveled in the novelty of having a coin of her own and **Daddy's lap all to herself. 50 cents was a lot of money in 1922, and Mama was** worried that she would have need of that money, but she felt so bad for having forgotten Rosella at Christmas that she held her peace and said nothing.

Afterwards, Rosella could never say if that was her best Christmas or her worst Christmas. She never forgot the heartbreak of seeing her stocking empty, and realizing Santa had forgotten her. It was a few years before she realized it was her **mother that had forgotten her, and that didn't make it any easier to remember. But that Christmas she did get a 50 cent coin and had Daddy's lap all to herself.** So it was a good Christmas after all.

### EPILOGUE

My mother told me this story of her childhood when I was 8 or 9 years old. We were in the kitchen, baking, singing carols and getting ready for Christmas. I remember crying and crying as if my heart would break. I thought of my Grandmother as a grinch; how could a person forget their own child at Christmas? But Mama explained how there were so many children, and it was hard to take care of the house and the family with not enough money, and so on. I still was heartbroken that my mother should have had such a sad Christmas. My own Christmases were so wonderful, but I guess that was why my mother worked so **hard getting ready for Christmas. I never forgot the story of my mother's Christmas, and every year, as I put up my Grandmother's manger scene, I think of** my mom and her mom. As I look at the beautiful coloured lights, I think of that Christmas in the little house in the woods. And every year, I think of all the wonderful presents I would buy my Mother if she were here. Mama died 29 years ago, but every year, I plan what I would get her if she were here. From the time I was 9, I made sure there was a special gift from me for my Mother under the tree. **I didn't want her to have another Christmas like the one she had when she was 7 in the little house in the woods.**

### MY FAVORITE PLACE

When I was seven, my Dad took my Mom, my cousin Bev and me to the Mira Boat Club for the Labour Day races. It was a defining moment in my life and that of my parents. The Boat Club was on Hillside Road in Mira, and was a converted farmhouse in the middle of a large field. There was a long hall attached to the house, but we could not go inside to see what it was like, because the clubhouse was restricted to members only and we were not members at that time.

I can still remember the sights and smells of that day. Bev and I sat on a log on the shore, and with our toy binoculars watched the races. We loved the roar of the

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motors when they started up. The men with their helmets and life jackets waded out into the water with their pants rolled up and their sneakers on. We were rather taken with the idea of going in the river with your clothes on.

Bev and I were fascinated by the whole experience. We loved the smell of the gas and exhaust from the engines, the noise and the excitement. We wandered around the field, watching families cheering for their favorites; we ate hot dogs and chips and pop we bought at the canteen for 25cents. It was a wonderful experience, and I guess not just for us, as my parents joined the Boat Club the next year, and then **promptly sponsored my Aunt and Uncle (Bev's parents).** As children of members we had all the privileges of members too, so that meant we could go into the clubhouse, and help out at the races. We had a great time, going around the field looking for empty bottles to bring back to the canteen for a few cents; we ran errands for our heroes, the boat drivers, running as fast as we could to get a wrench from someone, or to go to the canteen for a coffee or a hotdog.

Over the years, we spent our summer vacations there, moving our trailers out and setting them up in one corner of the lower field out of the way. We swam, rowed our boats, picked berries, and waited for the races. We started to spend our weekends there as well, and one summer we, my parents and I, stayed in the clubhouse with Bob Jollymore and his family taking care of the club, selling gas and so on.

The Mira became our favorite place in the world. We waited all year for the time to go to Mira. The river was our refuge and I soaked up the sight of the river and its sounds. The river glistened in the sunlight as the light danced on the waves, and in the evening the setting sun shot beautiful shades of red, orange and pink across it. I loved the river when it was calm and not a ripple moved across its surface. When the winds howled, and the waves raced and roared across the top of the river, I would stand with my face into the wind and feel the might and power of the river as it crashed onto the shore at my feet. And gradually, the Mira seeped into my soul and became the one place in the world I felt closest to God.

At the Boat Club, however, things began to change. Eventually, racing petered out. Racing came to an end, boats were too expensive and racing too risky for most people. **The crowds didn't come as they used to, and so racing dwindled. The Mira River wasn't great for races, because the wind came up most afternoons, and it was** hard for the smallest and most exciting boats, the hydroplanes, to race there, so the racers moved to a lake. The Boat Club went into a decline, but we built a par 3 nine-hole golf course there, and we had fun at that for a number of years.

My parents bought the bungalow next to the Boat Club in 1965 for \$2500. It was tiny and had only a couple of rooms and a porch, but we loved it. We started to spend our summers there, and in 1981, my husband and I spent three weeks there with our son and newborn daughter. The next year, we moved for the summer, and Dad signed the bungalow over to us. Then my husband got to work, and started to add to it and fix it up. For the next 23 years, we spent every summer there, and it **wasn't the same two years in a row.** He cut down trees in the woods at the end of

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our street in Sydney Forks, and then hauled the logs to a mill on Horne's road and had it sawn into lumber. He used it to add on to the old bungalow, and to raise the walls. One year, the old bungalow was inside the new one. The next year, we tore the roof off the old bungalow and put in a floor for the second story.

My favorite place was turning into a home. About 10 years ago, Roddie started digging the basement by hand. It started out to be a place for the pump, but he liked to dig, and over the next ten years, he dug and dug and dug, and this year, he finished it by pouring the last of the floor (he made his own cement in a little portable cement mixer). We moved to our little piece of paradise in 2005 when I retired. Over the years, the Mira became my husband's favorite place too. We love to sit by the river, I love to swim and in the winter I love the look of the river when the ice is on it, and you can look across the expanse of the ice, and see the birds on the ice. Walking on the edge of the frozen river is quite amazing. It is so quiet and peaceful. When you stand outside, you can hear birds chirping, maybe a dog is barking somewhere across the river, and maybe the water is lapping on the shore. But listen closer, and you can hear the silence. It seeps into your soul, and you feel at peace. I am so lucky to live here, in my favorite place. And sometimes, in the summer, when I am floating along in the river, and a boat goes by, or a boat starts up over at the Boat Club, I get a whiff of gas and exhaust, and I am transported back to when I was seven, and I am a little girl discovering for the first time the place that will forever be where my soul resides.

### STARTING OVER

Amy sighed, leaned over and rested her head on her hand and stared out the window. One lone tear slipped down her cheek and dropped onto the windowsill. This was her favorite place to sit and contemplate life. She had been doing this for the last fifteen years. She had been three when her family moved to this house, and this was her favorite place in the big, old house. The window looked out onto the quiet street.

Outside it was spring. The birds were singing and flying all over the place looking for bits and pieces to put in their nests. Soon little eggs would appear in those nests. Spring was an exciting time of year, with new life springing all around, but Amy was sad.

She was a pretty girl. She had long, dark brown hair that was rich and curly. She had a little, pert nose, and a curved mouth that usually rested in a smile. But today, Amy was sad. She had broken up with her boyfriend last night. To be truthful, he had broken up with her. They had been best friends and had been going together for the last three years – a lifetime when you were 18, and Amy was sure he was "the one". But Tom had had other ideas. Amy was off to university in the fall, and Tom was going to stay here and go to community college. He was going to get a trade, and then go out west to make his fortune. Amy was off to university, to become a teacher. She planned to return to her hometown to settle

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down, teach and raise a family. They wanted different things, but Amy thought they could work it out. Tom knew better and thought it would be better for them if they ended it now.

**Amy's heart was broken. But as she stared out the window, she thought about the fall and going to university.** Her best friend, Emily, was going too. They were going to room together, and were so excited about all the new experiences they would have and all the new people they would meet. She would be starting over, and that was exciting and fun. Amy smiled through her tears, closed her eyes for a moment and sighed.

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Amy opened her eyes and let out a long, slow breath. She stared at the leaves on the trees, and watched the cat trying to sneak up on a bird sitting on the fence. Stupid cat could never catch those fast-flitting birds, but he tried every day. The warm summer breeze came in the window. **A lone tear made its way down Amy's cheek.** It was a sad day. Her Mother was being buried in a little while, and she had lost her best and dearest friend. She was scared and worried about moving on without her. Her Mom had always been there and they had lived in love and harmony all her life. The last few years had been the best.

Amy had finished University as she had planned and then returned home to teach. She had moved back home to save money, but soon had met her destiny. Steve taught too, and they had lots in common. Soon, friendship had turned to love, and they had married and started a family. They had two children – the boy was 8, the girl was 6. **Three years ago, they had moved back into Amy's childhood home** when her father died, so **Amy's mother wouldn't be alone.** At first Amy had worried they would get tired of each other, or that they would be too noisy and busy for her Mother to handle. But her Mom had loved the hustle and bustle, and loved to mind the children when they got home from school.

**Everything had gone well, but last fall Amy's mother developed cancer and after a long, painful fight, she had gone home to God three days ago. Amy's brown eyes** filled with tears again, as she thought of life without her mother. She brushed her shoulder length brown hair back behind her ears, and sighed. She thought she could hear her mother whispering in her ear – **"I will always be with you."** And Amy knew she would always feel her Mother near. She had a wonderful husband, the love of her life for real this time, and two beautiful children. She had friends and a rewarding career. She was strong and brave and knew in her heart that she could and would go on. She was starting over again, and this time she would do things her way, with **her mother's sage advice in the back of her mind.** She smiled and looked once more out the window.

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The few red and gold leaves left on the trees were gradually detaching themselves from the branches and drifting down to join the piles of leaves on the ground. The

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wind suddenly gusted and swirled them around and around. Then the wind subsided and the leaves settled in a new pile. Amy sighed and a lone tear rolled down her small, wrinkled face. This was her last time to sit in her favorite seat and look out this window. For 76 years, this had been her favorite place to sit, but in a few minutes, her son would be here to take her to the Senior's home. Her Steve had died five years ago, and she had thought she could not go on, but somehow she had found the strength to continue with life. She had her children and grandchildren to visit. She still had friends and activities she liked to do, but she was a little frail, and felt it was time to move into a Senior's home where she would have friends and people close by if she needed them. She kind of liked the idea of having lots of people around and a small apartment to care for. She was nervous now alone in the big, old house.

Amy had made arrangements, and her grandson and his new wife would be moving in soon. They were going to do a few renovations, and some painting, and then the big, old house would be home for a new generation.

**Amy saw her son's car pull in to the driveway, and she started to get up to greet him.** Then she paused and stared as she caught her reflection in the window. Her long brown curls had turned to short, white, curly hair and her bright, blue eyes were faded and more gray than blue. Her smooth skin was now softly wrinkled, and a wise expression greeted the world. She was 79 and moving on once more to a new phase in her life. Amy was starting over -- again.

## Daphne Winans

*Telling stories has been a lifelong habit for me. As a little girl, I was frequently chastised, because I seldom allowed my stories to be interfered with by the truth; in fact, I preferred fiction (now that I'm rather old, I recognize the value of truth, strange as it often is)! Nowadays, I like to write short stories, essays and often indulge in a bit of poetry (or doggerel), just for fun.*

*A career in Sydney as announcer and occasional programme producer often included writing scripts and announcements of all sorts, so I enjoyed learning a variety of writing styles. I retired from the CBC in 1991.*

*Becoming a widow about a year and a half ago left me with little desire to write anything. Last fall, I saw a small announcement in the Cape Breton Post regarding a Senior Writers Circle. Knowing I should start getting out and developing some interests again, I decided to investigate this group. I'm so glad I did! I've met, been entertained and often touched by the other writers, and delighted to discover how much literary talent we have here. The happiest two hours of my week are spent in this warm and rewarding Circle, and I can write again!*

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## A MISCELLANEOUS HEN

### 1. *Class exercise – in five minutes, write on theme: "I remember the time..."*

I remember the time when I went with Mother to pick up the Bantam hen. Mother's dear friend Dorothy was moving away from her little farm and the hen, whose name was Sweet Potato, had to have a new home.

I don't remember getting to where Sweet Potato lived, but the drive home with her was quite memorable. The country road was very bumpy and the poor little red hen hated it. What could have been a nice drive in the country turned out to be a noisy, flapping pandemonium. Sweet Potato was in a big carton with a metal tray on its bottom and it made loud clanky noises when she stomped her feet, which she did -- a lot. Mother thought I was upsetting her (the hen, that is), but I wasn't.

### 2. *(Part 2 of exercise) from the viewpoint of another character in the story...*

I remember the day I had to go away. For all of my life, I had enjoyed the peace and quiet of the little garden and the cozy hut the Person had made for me in case of rain.

One day, my Person stroked me and made Person noises that had a different kind of sound. Water stuff from her eyes dripped onto my feathers and I knew something was very wrong. Then I was put into a different thing that wasn't a hut and there was no way out. There were two strange Persons and they picked up the not-a-hut thing with me in it. They put me and it in another very nasty big, big thing that bounced and swayed and made horrible noises --- worse than the rooster ever could.

### 3. *Homework assignment – expand story...*

The woman we got the hen from was called Dorothy. I don't know why she had to leave her little farm and give everything up. At the age of seven, you don't get all the information. She was quite old, but so were most adults back then.

Mother took Sweet Potato the hen in a big carton with straw in the bottom and holes cut out so she could breathe. She grumbled all the way home in the car, saying "Muck-muck-muck-muck," in a muffled, perturbed voice. Sweet Potato, that is, not Mother.

Later that day, Father brought a huge cage into the house and wanted to put it in the basement for Sweet Potato, but Mother wouldn't hear of it.

"A hen has to have sunlight," she told Father. "And she's a Red Bantam. She's a pet. We'll put her in the front window."

That meant the bay window in the living room, where the baby grand piano and Mother's antique parlor chairs resided, elegant and sublime. Father was horrified.

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"You'll turn our living room into a barnyard, Vi," he said.

"Dorothy *loved* this hen and we can't just banish her to the cellar," Mother declared. "This will have to do for now."

That was that. A table was found, the cage was placed in the window bay, beside the big rubber plant ("She'll think it's a tree and that she's outside," Mother declared) and Sweet Potato was moved into her new home. I was delighted. I was positive we were the only family in Montreal who had a little red hen in their formal living room. I was allowed to skip my piano exercises that day, so as not to disturb her.

Lots of kids came to see Sweet Potato. I liked saying: "We have a little red hen in our living room. She's *real!*" Many of the kids didn't believe me, because sometimes I said fantastic things, just for fun, but they were impressed when I *proved* it. My parents' friends were impressed too, I think. Some of them looked at Sweet Potato and couldn't think of anything to say. I found that very unusual.

Aunt Audrey had things to say, though; she said Sweet Potato wasn't sanitary, but Mother used my little sandbox pail and shovel to scoop the plops up every day and the newspapers on the bottom of the cage were changed regularly. She didn't smell bad and she acted very fussy and particular (Sweet Potato, I mean).

"It isn't healthy," said Aunt Audrey, with one of her sniffs.

"That's not true," I told her. "Sweet Potato is the healthiest hen in the world. She won the Blue Ribbon for Miscellaneous at the Pet Show yesterday. She's a *champion!*"

She *did* win, and the person who gave her the ribbon was a Vet, so she must have been very healthy. However, I was reprimanded for being impertinent to Aunt Audrey and had to apologize. I had to *lie*, and say I was *sorry*. Grownup demands could seem quite odd at times.

Unfortunately, Sweet Potato would go all haywire when I played the piano. She would start running around in circles, yelling blue murder, no matter what I played, or how softly. She dropped feathers then, too. Father said she was neurotic, which was apparently not good.

There seemed to be no solution. We couldn't move the big piano to any other room and Sweet Potato had to remain in the living room window or she'd pine away. We had to face the music, as it were, and let me skip piano practice for the "time being." As a result, I didn't get a medal in my Grade Two examination at the Royal Conservatory of Music. That didn't matter too much, because I already had a silver medal for Grade One. I decided to retire from my budding career as a concert pianist.

For a while, I hoped that Sweet Potato might lay some eggs and then I could have

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a bunch of little red chicks to show off to my friends. Father said that wasn't going to happen. We'd have to get a rooster and he was drawing the line at roosters. Sometimes, when Mother and Father weren't nearby, I would stand by Sweet Potato's cage and softly crow: "*Cock-a-doodle-do . . . cock-a-doodle-do,*" but no eggs ever appeared.

Of course, like other pets, hens don't live forever, so one day about a year and a half after Sweet Potato came to live with us, she quietly went to sleep for good. I was terribly sad and cried, but Father very kindly arranged a little funeral for her and we buried her in the garden behind the hollyhocks. I said the Lord's Prayer and was assured she had gone to a lovely barnyard in the sky.

I still have the First Prize Miscellaneous Blue Ribbon in a little box, along with my silver medal and one red feather. For some reason, I can't find any photos of Sweet Potato, but I do have an enduring one of her, unfaded, in my mind.

### A BIT OF CRANKY DOGGERAL

Maybe it's just because I'm old,  
But pancakes and groundhogs leave me cold.  
With doubtful credibility,  
No shadow did our groundhog see.  
With freezing rain and howling gales,  
Our optimism sadly fails.  
An early Spring, I hear you say?

I bet we'll shovel snow in May!  
If rodents could prognosticate,  
I might believe in charms and fate.  
Much as I respect traditions,  
I draw the line at superstitions.  
Now I've got that off my chest,  
I'll wish you all the very best ....  
Spring *will* come; that's all that matters,  
Regardless of groundhogs or pancake batters.

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### CALORIE CAROL

'Tis the season to be jolly. . .  
Soon we'll pay for Yuletide folly.  
Why do I insist on stuffing  
When I ought to be *enough*-ing?  
**Well perhaps I won't begrudge**  
A little piece of festive fudge;  
Eggnog with a drop of rum  
Washes down the sugar plum.

All those lovely cakes and pies  
You present before my eyes-  
**While you're twisting on my arm-**  
Couldn't do me any harm . . .

Christmas feasting time is here  
**And it's only** once a year.  
Let me be a hopeless glutton  
Though I'll pop another button.

I simply can't resist excesses,  
So I'll just let out my dresses  
(Nasty wrinkles disappear  
With a little fat my dear).

If Santa was a skinny chap,  
Would kids be cozy on his lap  
And would he still go Ho-Ho-Ho?  
**Somehow I can't imagine so.**

So lets be free and merry  
With a chocolate-covered cherry,  
And a bite of Christmas cake  
Is **required** for goodness sake.

Counting Christmas grams of fat  
Is hardly where we should be at.  
**No one's grim Weight-Watchery**  
Should spoil this sweet debauchery!

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### GREETINGS

It's the week before Christmas and all round the 'Bay  
It's snowing and blowing in a Cape Breton way.

The cats are curled up on the best chairs I own,  
The house is so messy, I can't find the phone.

Cats playing with ribbon and sprawling on tissue,  
Makes wrapping the gifts a difficult issue.

Last Boxing Day's bargains, just as I feared,  
Were so carefully stored, they've all disappeared.

Some elegant cards you won't see this year,  
Are still safely hidden somewhere around here.

In spite of confusion and last-minute flurry,  
I send my best wishes to you in a hurry:

May your stockings be full of the things you find dear,  
And may Christmas blessings surround you all year!

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### JAKE'S MEMORY

It was when lemon grass was blowing in Gleason's Lane.  
I went there alone that day, and I may not go again.  
That was the very day that Postman Dantry died.  
It was almost a week before I *knew*, and cried.  
**I mean, I heard about it on the day, but couldn't feel it,**  
and later, when I did, that seemed to seal it.  
Old Dantry was slow, some people said,  
with a kind of tilted smile and bobbing head.  
**they didn't know the postman like I did,**  
or the decent way he'd always treat a kid.  
**I bet they didn't know he'd had a wife,**  
or even heard him talk about his life.  
Postman Dantry was the truest friend I had  
and the only man who made up for my dad.  
He used to point it out that I was smart,  
and he called my crayon drawings "works of art."  
Dantry was the one gave Bones his name,  
and I gave Bones to him when he got lame.  
My dad had kicked that dog one night,  
and Dantry took him in and made things right.  
**That's the kind of person Dantry was,**  
and *he* never answered questions with "because."  
**Oh, how I miss him and it isn't fair.**  
Growing up without him feels like no one there.  
**Dantry said that Gleason's Lane was a magic sort of place,**  
and then a kind of happy look would play around his face.  
The only house left standing on the Lane in fifty-four  
**was where he lived, and now, it isn't any more.**  
Lemon grass and daisies go on dancing in the sun,  
and, oh, . . . I *might* go back there when my growing-up is done.  
I could build myself a bungalow,  
where the old foundations barely show,  
and maybe, on those beloved grounds  
where Dantry ended all his rounds,  
**I'd sense that gentle, magic touch**  
**that all this time, I've missed so much.**

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### POWER – PAST & PRESENT

My mother, who was a very sensible person, was, however, terribly afraid of storms. Actually, it was lightning that scared her, but thunder also had a most remarkable effect on her usual serenity and dignity. She would go: "Ooh, ooh, mercy!" at even quite low rumbles.

Mother was very wary of electricity. For a woman of her generation (she was born in 1887) Mother knew quite a lot about electrical power. She also had some convincing theories on the subject. My sister and I were lectured on the dangers of arcing, circuitry and current.

Mother had great faith in the properties of rubber for grounding, so when thunder and lightning occurred, she would make a dash for Father's big rubber boots, put them on along with a coat and hat for insulation, even in the heat of summer, and retreat to the closet with a flashlight. The benefit the closet offered was two-fold. Not only did it provide an extra layer of shielding from the outdoor situation, but it also muffled the thunder that Mother knew preceded those awful bolts of light.

My sister Mardy and I were not afraid of electrical storms; in fact, we *liked* them. With Mother safely ensconced in the hall closet, Mardy and I would watch the storm from the front window, which we were not supposed to do. We had been warned to stay away from all windows, open or not, during lightning storms. Loud claps of thunder delighted us, but didn't quite drown out the "ooh, ooh, mercy" emanating from Mother's sanctuary. We should have been more sympathetic. Instead, our lack of concern made us feel rather smart and invincible.

Mother used to claim that thunderstorms made her feel quite ill and actually upset her stomach. Father was of the opinion that her distress was a result of the strong odor of mothballs that permeated the hall closet.

I'm still not afraid of storms, but that powerful wind of November third this year did quite a number on the electricity in my house. I didn't have a total power outage, but many things did go haywire. The lights would dim down to just a faint glow every so often, or occasionally flare up with alarming brightness. All the plugged-in clocks flashed zeroes or eights. The toaster expired after 15 seconds of effort. The refrigerator made groaning noises as its motor tried to come on, but couldn't stay on. There were other odd sounds . . . from unknown sources. My home took on a haunted-house atmosphere a few days late for Halloween.

As I began, belatedly, to fill some containers with water in case the power went out completely, I realized the flow from the tap was rapidly decreasing. Soon it was just a trickle, then a few drops, and finally the pipe under the sink let out a gasp of total defeat, and all hope of more water was lost.

I went down the basement. I figured out that a small fuse box near the water pump had a blown fuse in it. I replaced the fuse with one of the two spares I had. When I

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pressed the "ON" switch, the pump coughed and the lights went down to a mere glimmer. After a few more dry heaves, the pump mumbled something in a frustrated sort of tone. Then it quit.

I called a heating and pumping outfit.

24 hours later, a man came over to look at my pump. Looking was all he seemed to do, although he did execute a further fuse-blown exercise with my last spare fuse and announced that the problem was electrical. He left.

I called an electrical contractor.

24 hours later, an electrician came over. He discovered that there was insufficient power coming into my house. He said I should contact Nova Scotia Power. I did so, after he left.

24 hours later, a Nova Scotia Power team repaired a "loop," as they called it, on a pole across the street, and the house-haunting ceased.

The water pump, however, continued to rest in peace.

I called the heat and pump outfit again. To my grateful surprise, the pump man arrived a mere 4 hours later, installed a new fuse in the little box, primed the pump and pressed the "ON" switch. The pump woke up and made appropriate, happy noises and *I had water*.

I resisted a sudden urge to hug the pump man, wrote out a check for a hundred and fourteen dollars. He left, and I filled the kettle for tea. Flushing the toilet brought me a celebratory flood of pure joy.

Nowadays, I *have* grown more wary of thunderstorms, but not as wary as Mother was, because for me, the *lack* of electrical power seems far more significant than the possible evils thereof.

### WAR AND PEACE

In 1945 I was 6 years old and in Grade 1. One day in school, our teacher told us that something wonderful had happened. World War Two was over and Peace had been declared in Europe. All around the world, people were cheering and celebrating in the streets, even in Montreal where I lived. We were told there would be no lessons that day and we could go home.

**I was happy to go home early, but at the age of six I wasn't at all sure that war's end was a good thing. What would we do with our evenings now? Would we no longer listen to the BBC on the big radio in the living room, while Mr. Churchill (our hero) would say brave and clever things, his voice coming and going like the**

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ocean waves that I believed were bringing him to us; retreating and returning like **surf rolling onto the seashore, sometimes roaring over us and lifting my parents' spirits.** Would there be no sirens for practice blackouts, that scared and thrilled me out of sleep, bringing mummy to **my room, where she'd tell me everything was all right? She'd stand by the drawn curtains, a shadowy, familiar shape dimly lit from the outside,** until the streetlights went out and the sirens stopped. I knew mummy was there. I could hear her rustling. Again, she would reassure me, which is really **the most important thing when you're six and you've been wakened in the dark.** Could I still get things from my pink ration book? I had several milk and sugar coupons left.

**At that time, Peace didn't appeal to me.** Peace, I thought, meant silence, which could be very boring. The horrors and cruelties of war had been carefully kept from me, as was the case with most young Canadian children back then.

Years later, when I was about nineteen, I joined some fairly mild protest marches and rallies, with a woven band around my head and the required love beads. I considered myself a Peacenik. I had learned about some of the realities of war and had begun to hate and fear its horrible consequences.

Today, in spite of never having experienced any close encounters of battles or bombs, if I was to hear that Peace had been declared in the middle East, or Africa, or Asia; anywhere where fighting and killing are ruining or ending lives, I would be one of the first to cheer and celebrate in the street.

**I can't be six years old again, safe and unaware, believing in heroes and honour; knowing nothing of hatred and insanity. But I'm glad to have that naïve, foolish time to remember, as a lucky Canadian child.**

### STATEMENTS

#### **It isn't very funny when you haven't any money**

And the bills are flying in like hungry crows  
With their balances outstanding, they achieve a perfect landing,  
And where the money went, nobody knows.

So I look for nameless labels, heading for the bargain tables  
And I scoop stuff now, in bulk, upon occasion.  
When a brand is well-reputed, my remote is quickly muted  
In an effort to avoid TV persuasion.

**But the effort's self-defeating, when the bills keep on repeating  
That the "Due Date" is the day I have to pay.**

I keep hoping I can fudge it while I try to stretch the budget,  
**But guess who had a sale the other day...**

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I saw lovely things I needed and I never even heeded  
Inner voices warning me about the cost.  
**Now my latest binge has ended, 'cause my paycheck is all spended**  
And my overdraft is over . . . done . . . and lost.

### ODETO AGE

So here it is, the unprepared-for route,  
Always up ahead, denied, but waiting  
While we turned the corner to discover  
That the road continues,  
And we're still here.

We tremble at the entrance to a tomb,  
But turn away and stumble up the road.  
Our new and lean companion is Reality.  
We have many things to carry,  
But we're still here.

We will shoulder treasures we have gathered  
And shed the clinging shackles of regret,  
For we have won some bitter battles  
And we have lost so much,  
But we're still here.

The laughter that we cannot put to rest;  
The irony that commands a sudden smile;  
The birth of something lovely springing forth  
Defy the pace of Time  
And we're still here.

So listen to the whisper of the stars  
And watch the dawn glow up like sacred flames.  
Let's thank whatever God we pray to

That one more day has come  
And  
We're  
Still  
Here!

### Kenneth J. Beaton

*The stories presented here are the result of class projects and incidents of past memories. Some are of times that I was inspired by an article, that I may have read, that triggered a story idea. Others have been created on account of our ten minute free writing exercise in our weekly two hour session, held every Tuesday afternoon. Others, from homework assignments from the previous week, regarding topics that the class had pre-selected.*

*I enjoy writing, and the time spent with the class, and our facilitator Kathy MacCuish, have been a rewarding experience for me. I believe that there is a story in each of us, and being a part of this writing circle, has been an enormous help to me, and to the people who make up our weekly group. We have been meeting since last September and the experience of sharing ideas and of our writing essays and short stories, has shown me just how diversified we are as a group. We all continue to learn from one another, and when this session is over, I'm sure, like the rest of the class, I look forward to the start of the next session in September.*

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### A FALL DAY ON SYDNEY HARBOUR

As Muriel and Dave Windom awoke and opened the blinds on a Monday in late October, they were surprised to see what a wonderful day they were going to enjoy. They had planned to go downtown and do a little shopping and just get out and enjoy the day. The weatherman on the radio said that it was expected to reach a high of 20 degrees, unusual to say the least, for this time of year. Let's call it global warming, I guess. After breakfast and a little cleaning of the house, they were both dressed and ready to go. Just in case the weather wasn't going to get as high as expected they took along their jackets. As they walked down the steps they noticed that the sun was bright, the sky was clear and bright blue, and there was no wind. "Muriel" says Dave "Let's leave the car home and walk to town; we won't get too many more days like this, and it's only about 3 kilometers."

Muriel answered "yes let's do it, we can take our time and get the bus home."

As they walked at a leisurely pace, they noticed things that they hadn't really bothered to look at before, as they were always driving by and always seemed to be in a rush. Some of the older buildings that had been done over, and some where old friends had once lived now moved away or who had passed on.

"You know Bill we should have been doing this for years, at least a few evenings this past summer, and the exercise alone would have been a benefit in itself."

As they neared the corner of Charlotte Street and Prince, Bill suggested that they keep going down to the boardwalk on the Esplanade to sit for awhile and get a little rest before going to the stores.

"Sounds good to me and I got a little warm with walking anyways" she answered.

As they were sitting on one of the benches on the boardwalk, they noticed a Cape Islander boat coming along side the rocks that protected the boardwalk from the pounding waves in the rough sea weather. They didn't have to worry about that today, as the sea was as calm as a mirror. The boat slowed to a stand still and the fellow at the wheel hollered to Bill.

"Bill you old sun of a gun, I haven't seen you since you retired from the steel plant 10 or 12 years ago."

"My God" says Bill to Muriel, "If it isn't one of my old plant buddies Dougie Hicks from over Westmount way."

**"Dougie you're a sight for sore eyes, what are you doing out on the water this time of year in a boat? Shouldn't you have her up on land for the winter?"**

"Well yes, but the weather has been so great this year, I resisted as long as I could, but she's coming out this week for sure. Listen walk up ahead to the yacht club and

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I'll pull in one of the loading docks and you and Muriel can come aboard for a chat and a little cruise on the harbour on this beautiful day."

As Bill and Muriel got aboard the "Susie Q", Dougie maneuvered the craft out into the stream and headed for the Sydney River Bridge. Boy wasn't it wonderful to be alive and cruising the harbour on such a pleasant fall day.

"Here," he says to Muriel, "sit here and take her up the harbour just turn the wheel when I tell you." Well, if you could see the look on her face as she guided the boat towards the bridge, you'd think she had died and gone to Heaven. Never in her wildest dreams did she ever think that she could do this oh what a great feeling. As they neared the sunken trawler, Dougie instructed her to slow down and to turn to starboard, which he explained was to the right. When she had made the turn he told her to head back up the harbour and pass by the Dobson yacht club which was on her "port" side which he explained was to her left. As they neared it, they could see almost all of the vessels were out of the water and stored for the winter. Muriel was ecstatic and having so much fun when Dougie suggested that Bill take over the controls for awhile.

As he settled in Dougie told Bill to head east to the starboard and Sydney side of the harbour and then straighten out when they got about 200 feet from the government wharf. He then instructed his old friend to head out to about the middle of the harbour and just continue along, guiding the boat over towards the **Naval base docks, but to slow down as they approached them. Then he said "all** right now, turn right or to the starboard side, and head towards the international coal piers **but not to get too close."**

"Boy," Bill hollers out loud, "this has to be the greatest fun in the world." As they passed by the piers Dougie suggested to get out in the mid stream again and head out to sea down towards South Bar. They traveled just about off the Polar Bear beach and Dougie suggested that they make a turn towards the Sydney Mines side of the harbour, and then head back in towards Sydney. Just like a master mariner, Bill turned the wheel to port and headed straight for the North side Marine Atlantic wharf. As they neared it Dougie says, "I better take over now Bill as it could be a little tricky for a novice up around the big ships."

**They moved about the "Caribou", which was at her dock and** couldn't believe just how big the ship was. Then Dougie said, "well it's getting late in the day I guess we better head for home."

As Dougie maneuvered the craft into the Cape Breton Yacht club wharf and Bill and Muriel departed, they couldn't thank him enough for such a wonderful experience on such a glorious day.

"We'll do it again next summer for sure" says Dougie as he maneuvered the craft **around the wharf. "It was great seeing you again after all these years, we must get** together sometime this winter and talk about the old days." with that he reverred up the motor on the boat and was headed for the other side of the harbour.

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It was too late now to do any shopping so Bill and Muriel walked up the Prince Street hill to the corner of Charlotte Street, and waited in front of the old radio building for the bus that would take them to Ashby and home, all the time thinking just how lucky they were.

### HONESTY HAPPINESS AND LIFE

As I strolled up Charlotte Street, the pavement and cement were still wet from last night's rain shower. There weren't many shoppers around town this morning, as it was early, and I guess that most were waiting for the sun to come out. The weather forecast called for sunny and warmer temperatures before noon, so it looked like a really nice fall day was on the way. A lone paper boy was on the street hollering, "Cape Breton Post," and about a dozen or more people making their way along the sidewalks, but other than that it looked a little slow. Before I knew it people started to arrive around the stores and many were window shopping. I couldn't believe how the people started moving about, the traffic picked up and it looked like a good day for the store owners. As I was looking around at the busy street, in amazement, an onslaught of people were making their way up Charlotte Street from Dorchester. Of course, the cruise ship Massdam was at the wharf. I completely forgot all about it. The streets of Sydney usually are barren early in the mornings, but these cruise ships arriving on different schedules, revive the downtown area with their walk-about to the museums and churches, and the buildings of interest. The ship tourists caused a beehive of activity in the community, especially for the merchants of the area. I was just out walking this morning and looking at the older buildings that had been retrofitted on the outside. My, how Charlotte Street looked new and refreshing.

Stopping at the old Crowell's building, at the corner of Prince and Charlotte, I decided to step inside to see the changes that had taken place. There were numerous boutiques in the old department store that certainly modernized the big block. I was interested in the unique money payment method and the way it worked in the busy store. Years ago, as you reached the top of the stairs at the second floor, there was an office that had workers in there inserting and taking out money and reinserting change and the receipt for things bought through a system of brass tubes and cartridges which held the money and were directed to certain parts of the store by and ingenious vacuum system. I was eager to see if the system was still in place, as it was truly fascination to watch. yes much to my surprise it was still there and still working. Will wonders never cease? While there watching the goings on, I noticed a wallet on the floor and as I picked it up I opened it up to see if it belonged to anyone I might have known. Apparently it belonged to one of the passengers off the MV Massdam as it had the name of a man and his address from California. As I looked inside curious to see what information I may find that would give me more information on the owner, I noticed numerous credit cards and a large amount of cash. What was I to do?

This story started off as a wonderful trip for a Mr. Joseph Canella and his wife Viola.

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After the ship had docked at the wharf, apparently they were two of the first off the ship to make their way up the long hill to a sign that directed them to a craft show just a block up the street. On their way they saw the oldest church in Sydney. 1758 St. George's a garrison church, being history buffs they had to go inside and see such an old building, and were quite amazed at what they saw. Joe could have stayed for hours, but Viola was eager to get next door at the church hall to view the craft exhibit. In there they were not disappointed to see all the homemade crafts and Viola was eager to buy. Figuring that the day would be short, they made their way down the street past the convent and noticed that the doors were wide open at Sacred Heart Church. Built in 1887 it was a wooden structure that had been appointed as an historical site within the province. It was quite a large edifice and they took their time looking around until they had some photos that would bring back memories later when they got home. Leaving the church they headed for the business district of Charlotte St.

Viola mentioned to Joe that she really enjoyed walking around and the shops and people were both quaint and friendly. As they moved about on Charlotte Street **checking out the stores, they happened upon the Crowell's building. There was a** small restaurant in there and so they decided to sit down and rest for awhile before continuing on. With the menu in front of them they decided to have a bowl of Cape Breton home made soup some tea biscuits and a cup of tea. As they looked around they could see the ornate carvings well above them and the quiet feel of just being happy together on this trip.

Joe saw the intricate brass vacuum system and got quite curious. He inquired if he could see how it worked and was invited to come and have a look for himself. Somewhere along the way, he must have dropped his wallet. I guess that's when I entered the building and was fortunate for them to have picked up the wallet.

Joe and Viola in the meantime after his excursion enjoyed their meal, and Joe paid from the bills in his pant pockets. I guess it must have been much later he discovered that he had lost his wallet. I can imagine his grief. They made their way back to the ship and waited hopefully that someone would turn it in.

I didn't know what to do, to blurt it out I found a wallet seemed inappropriate, should I go to the police? Maybe I should go down to the ship. Yes, that was it, go down to the ship and see the security guard on duty.

When I arrived I walked to the gangplank and approached the main security officer. I asked him if I might see Joe Canella about an important matter. He was quick to oblige and got in contact with the ship's information center and before 10 minutes had passed the security guard introduced Mr. Canella. He was worried, but I called him aside and told him I found his wallet and it was intact. Well it was like the lights on New Years Eve at times Square. Talk about seeing a dismal, haggard man come to life was great. I guess I saved the man and his wife their life's savings. It was quite a feeling.

"Please" he said "what can I give you for a reward."

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"Nothing for me please, that's your hard earned money to enjoy your pension."

**"But", I said, "if you could arrange for me to tour just the top deck of the ship, so** you can enjoy the rest of your visit that is all I would like. I know you would have to get permission, but I live here and was never on a cruise ship, and would just love to walk around the top deck."

After consulting with the security and having told him what had happened earlier that day, He assigned a man with us and up we went to the top of the MV Massdam. Well I was on top of the world and having spent about 30 minutes there, as I didn't want to take time from the visitors, I was quite content to leave the ship.

After many handshakes and thank yous, I got what I wanted and Joe and Viola Canella were like little children. "what a place he says to me, we'll be back, in any other port that wallet would never be found, but thanks to honest people like you, we can enjoy our vacation. Talk about thanksgiving, It's one I'll never forget."

"Well Joe and Viola, Thank you. I enjoyed the tour of the ship. Maybe you started your trip off on the right foot when visiting those first two churches. It may have been a blessing for all of us, who knows. Enjoy the rest of your visit and cruise."

### MAUDE FINDS NEW MEANING TO LIFE

Maude was busy since early in the morning, cleaning up the house, doing the breakfast dishes, and making up the beds. It was quiet now alone, as her husband and children had left for work and school, and wouldn't be home till late in the day. At just about 10:15, with all her chores completed, Maude had an eerie, lonely feeling come over her, as she sat by the kitchen window. In the distance she could see the outline of the mountains on the horizon, to the north of the city, as they ridged their way down north. The sun was out, the sky was blue, it was a wonderful spring day, but Maude was not content, she felt like something was missing. "God," she thought to herself, "this is going to be a long day." Rather than spend it alone in the house, she decided to go to the mall and do a little shopping, and to mingle with the crowds. Surely that would cheer her up.

"Yes," she said out loud, "Maybe I'll stop in at the Tim Horton's coffee shop and treat myself to lunch after an hour of shopping."

**By 11 o'clock Maude was walking through the mall and stopping** every now and then to check on sale items in a few of the stores. She busied herself at one of the fashionable ladies shops and tried on a few outfits but couldn't decide on just what to buy. "I'll drop back later on my way out." she exclaimed to the clerk and made her way up the mall to the bookstore. In the magazine section, she noticed the cover of Good Housekeeping and scanned the content pages. There were a few

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articles that caught her attention, one on eliminating clutter in spring house cleaning, and another on basics in creating your first garden, and finally one on volunteering your spare time. She paid for the magazine and made her way around the corner, wondering if she should head for home, when it occurred to her that it was near noon and lunch time.

With the smell of fresh baked donuts and perked coffee wafting in the air, Maude **made a beeline for the Tim Horton's outlet. As she entered, there didn't seem to be** a seat anywhere, and then she heard a voice call her by name. "Maude, Maude, over here by the window." As she followed where the voice was coming from, she noticed a small woman waving her arm in the air. " My God," exclaimed Maude, "If it isn't Unice Flannigan, an old high school friend of mine that I haven't seen in years and years."

**"Well you're a sight for sore eyes", said Unice, " What a wonderful surprise to see** you again after all these years, come sit down here and fill me in on what has been going on in your life."

After what seemed like hours talking over old times and what had transpired in their lives, Unice told Maude that she was in town on a business trip and that she would be heading back to Ontario and her job as an interior decorator. Maude was to learn that she had a successful business in Toronto and that she and her husband lived just north of the city in a small rural area with their two small children.

Maude couldn't get over how vibrant and full of zest Unice seemed and inquired as to what kept her so full of life. "Well , " answered Unice, "Working in a big city like Toronto all week and the traveling back and forth daily, can become a grind, So on the weekends I have my garden to unwind in, and also I volunteer when ever I can with the local church group."

"It's just amazing to see you again Unice and to see how satisfied you are in Life. Why, just this morning I was questioning my purpose in life and feeling so lonely in my own home with no one around." said Maude,

"Why, I'm going to start doing the same things you are doing. Look at this magazine I just bought at Cole's, it's unexplainable that there are articles in here that are about the lifestyle you are leading. You know It's a stroke of luck or fate or something, that you and I met here this morning, because I never come here." I can see where I have been wasting my time. There is so much to do to contribute to things, that there is just no need to be lonely."

"If I hadn't met you this morning I never would have realized that I have to keep busy and also to have an interest in things outside of the home."

With that, both women exchanged phone numbers and addresses with the promise to keep in touch and to rekindle their old friendship. As Unice's ride came to take her to the airport, Maude headed up Prince St. with a spring in her step and a smile

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on her face and as the sun beamed down on her, Maude thought she smelled the scent of flowers as she made her way home.

### TRAIN MEMORIES

Rusty old tie plates, creosoted ties,  
rotting where once rail lay.  
Weeds grow tall now, once you could hear the conductor say. " All aboard."  
The promise of a new land from east to west.  
Cultures, commodities, communities joined.  
The railroad was the best.  
Confederation hung on it.  
Freight rates were small, passenger fares too,  
the station ticket agent could almost promise you, delivery overnight.  
The trains got through.  
Safe and reliable. The weather didn't matter.  
Clickety clack, clickety clack, as they moved on down the track.  
Now the weeds grow taller, there's no rumble, there's no roar, or bells clang day  
and night,  
the clickety clack.  
Forget that it's not there anymore.  
Now, new sounds heard are zoom and screech, air brakes, pneumatic doors,  
opening, closing, a lurch into a higher gear down the long highway.  
Sounds of buses and tractor trailer trucks,  
blotting from the far recess of the mind, echoing sounds of bells and whistles  
and clickety clack, and trains and to leave remembrance, as I look at rusty old tie  
plates and creosoted ties, rotting where once the rail lay.

### THE TWO INCIDENTS

As we age and enter our twilight years, we sometimes think back to past memories both good and bad, and reflect on them as to how they have affected our lives. One event I recall took place in my life when I had just turned eight. The story dates back over 50 years ago, and still has an effect on me as being memorable. Nothing like what's happening these days. But then again these are my memories.

**My father had dropped dead at the bank teller's stall, in the old Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce branch, at the corner of Dorchester and Charlotte streets, when I was six years old. I really didn't comprehend what had taken place.**

**We lived in an old apartment building in Sydney's north end, and all I knew was** that my mom looked after all nine of us. She hit the road cleaning buildings. When I think back, she probably scrubbed every commercial store in the city, and a lot of private homes, and sometimes I helped her with the chores. Of course that was a little later in my life, around when I was ten. In those times, there were no food

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banks, or social assistance, or help from anyone, but mom wouldn't have accepted it anyway, as I was to learn later in life. She was a proud and independent woman. She certainly had a lot of worries as a single mother with a very large family.

But let's start this off as a story that started when I was eight years old. Just another worry she had to endure. I can't imagine the horror on her face when I was presented to her on the doorstep of our Dolbin Street home on that fateful day. First let me recall the story.

It was extremely hot as Johnny and I walked to the harbour shore along the tracks in the Sydney railroad yard. The smell of creosote wafting in the air from the ties below, was strong, as it oozed wet in spots on the surface of the wood. We were careful of shunted railway cars on the fly, coming from in front of us, as we made our way along the tracks. We had traveled along this route on many occasions in **our adventures. Sometimes we'd trek over to the cleaning tracks where** the passenger equipment was being cleaned for service on their daily runs. We were looking for empty bottles that the cleaning crews would discard, from the dirty **coaches that had arrived over night. After our scouring, we'd cross over the tracks** to the road that ran alongside the roundhouse, and walk along the shore of the creek, that was opposite the large banks of the Dosco Steel Plant. In the distance under the clear blue summer sky, the waters of Sydney Harbour lay outstretched to the shores of Point Edward just across the way. The harbour was our destination today and we were making a beeline straight for the old government wharf shore, and the cool water that waited beyond.

As we walked to the end of the rail line, the squealing of the steel wheels from the switching engine could still be heard down the tracks. As we neared the harbour, we were just below the old marine hospital that was located at the end of George St. in the city's north end. **Opposite the last end of the rail line, there were about** 14 or so, wooden barges placed on their sides, in a vertical position with their flat bottoms facing away from each other. Ask any kid growing up in the north end of **Sydney back in the 50's, and they could tell you of the fun times playing around** those old barges. **On this day, we'd use their shelter to change into our swim trunks** from our street clothes, and gallivant to the beach. The squeal of the gulls overhead, and the cry of other kids playing on the beach and in the water, echoed over the hill just in front of us. Boy it was great to be here today, and even though **I couldn't swim, I couldn't wait to get in that water. The tide was out, so the** outcrop of old boulders that ran under the old wooden government wharf, which was long gone now, was inviting for us to walk out to the end.

**That's when I got into trouble. Off the slime green rocks, I slipped under the water.** I can remember "Red" MacDonald just about 10 years old, trying to help me as the other kids hollered to the crowd on the shore. It was Gerald Gallant that caught me, I learned later, as I was heading down for the third time. He carried me to the top of the beach hill, and asked a few car owners if they would drive us home. No one would help. Gerald did the next best thing, he carried me in his arms to Dolbin Street, about two miles away. This all was revealed later by those who had witnessed the event.

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The story appeared in the Post Record the next day, and over the years my mother tried in vain to have Gerald recognized, but alas, to no avail. If I had been the child of some rich family, I'm sure the story would have been different. Gerald is dead now, as is "Red" Mac Donald, and also Johnny MacKinnon. Now, the ironic part of this story is that Johnny and I, and a few other friends were to meet at the old library, that was located in the basement of the old Sydney court house on Charlotte Street. This was about 8 years later, almost to the day.

For what ever reason, as I walked through the old navy league barracks, that were located across from Sacred Heart Church, and jumped the fence to the court house, none of my friends were there. As I was to learn later, Johnny had drowned at the old Sydney reservoir. I never learned why they had changed their plans, and often wonder if I had been there that day, as he had been with me, years before, would he still be here? It's a question I guess I'll never know, but often wonder about throughout the years.

### TRICK OR TREAT

Growing up as a child in Sydney it was always something special to me if for some reason school was called off on account of the weather. But there was one day in particular I was always concerned about it being nice and dry, and that was on Halloween. I never wanted to see it canceled or postponed. I always had some kind of old clothing much too big for me and probably a simple mask something like the Lone Ranger used to wear, they were popular back then. There seemed like a million kids around our part of the city and we started early, going door to door with the old refrain "trick- or treat." None of us got into any trouble and the people mostly poor at that time, handed out suckers or candy kisses, apples plain or taffied, and of course homemade rice crispy squares or fudge and there were other treats, but I don't remember bars or potato chips.

I believe I may have seen the odd pumpkin in some of the homes windows, but I was mostly concerned with the filling of my old pillowcase to store my loot. I had candy for weeks when it was all over.

Today Halloween is the second biggest holiday celebration next to Christmas. To drive down many streets even at the beginning of October we are constantly inundated with orange lights either flashing in the windows or glowing constantly. Sometimes I wonder if these people have stocks in NS Power Corp. Then the decorations that some people go through the trouble to surround their property with, seems to me one is trying to outdo the other. But it gives a nice touch to see bales of hay and makeshift people stuffed coveralls with a mask sitting on a verandah surrounded by a bunch of pumpkins. It's good for the little kids anyway.

In the old days the city would hire people to stand watch at the fire boxes located on certain poles throughout the different wards. All you had to do was pull down the lever and that would send the fire trucks from one of the city's three stations.

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There are no fire boxes now they are just a memory. Probably the best move the city did with technology.

I can remember back about 30 years ago 150 or more kids coming to the door before the cutoff time of 8pm. The last two years I was lucky to get 15 each year. And those kids are driven to the neighborhood by their parents who park and wait for them. Times have certainly changed.

I'd come home back when I was a child and turn on the radio. The CBC usually had some show on where people told stories of what they did in their part of the country. Turning over outhouses seemed to be a popular thing way back then in rural Canada. There is another incident that has been going on for the past 20 years or more on Victoria Road in Sydney where there is a tire fire every year on Halloween night that has me baffled as to how they drop off the tires and have them ablaze and why they have not been caught ever. I must watch for it again this year as the stain, the burnt tires leave on the pavement is there for quite awhile.

As I mentioned before, as we age our neighborhoods seem to be shrinking of both older and younger people. I guess the kids today and their parents that decorate so lavishly, because these props aren't cheap, are looking forward to tomorrow night and all the goodies that they will be collecting. I'm sure that in years to come that these kids will have wonderful memories of Halloween. Too bad the teens of the day couldn't remember the fun they had when they were younger and that drugs and damage that they take and do with no fear of the police or adults can deter them and make Halloween the fun time that it is supposed to be.

### WHEN TELEVISION FIRST ARRIVED

Window shopping was something I was never interested in, particularly in the fall. However, back on a cold November evening in 1954, there I was, along with numerous other intrigued people, standing for hours in front of a store window doing just that. It was the large plate glass window of C.R. Mason's Furniture store on Charlotte St in Sydney. What we were looking at were two different models of what would become one of the greatest inventions of mankind in so far as entertainment and advertising were concerned, the television set. That was my first encounter with television and the excitement that it created was an amazing event in my life.

Up to that point, the only moving pictures I had seen before were at the three local movie theaters. Back then, most people had a radio set of some description at their home, where they gathered with their friends for important newscasts or live sporting events. The Gillette cavalcade of Sports, with Don Dunphy doing the Friday night fights and the Saturday night big hockey game with Foster Hewitt and his "Hello hockey fans in Canada and the United States," were two such programs that were enjoyed by many people.

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But this medium called television was something really new. Why you could actually see what was going on instead of sitting around in a circle or propping your head up against the radio listening to what the announcer was saying and trying to visualize it in your mind. Advertising in those early years was limited to the radio and the newspaper industries. There were numerous furniture stores and radio repair shops in Sydney, and when television came upon the scene, the store owners were quick to display this latest invention. When the stores closed for the business day, the owners had speakers set up outside their premises and would watch for awhile.

If my memory serves me correctly, the sets were introduced in two sizes, 17" and 21" screens, and the choice was yours for either a floor or stand modeL There was no colour back then just the standard black and white, and channel selection was unheard of. As a matter of fact, the one channel that was available locally in those early days of television, was only on for a part of the day and part of the night, and when the station went off the air, a test pattern was shown that had the ability to keep you mesmerized.

Some or those old shows that were telecast that come to mind included the Milton Berle Show, a variety package that featured comedy skits and singing guests, Highway Patrol starring Broderick Crawford, an action packed thriller with lots of chase scenes, wrestling matches featuring the likes of Killer Kowolski, Gorgeous George, and the midgets with Little Beaver, and of course the boxing matches from the famous Toronto landmark the Palace Pier. There were also children's programs, with the most notable being the Howdy Doody Show, and of course the local news and some local productions in entertainment that included, Joe Murphy's swing band later called Melody Lodge, and then the Cape Breton Barn Dance show featuring the Radio Ranch boys with performers that included, Mickey Macintyre, Byron Macphee, Joe Waye, and Trainor Donovan. They were a popular group at the dances around the area and had a show on Saturday on CJCB Radio. Later on television the comedy of Hughie and Allan was featured in the barn dance show.

I believe the news back then had no live feed from the major networks for viewing, and in the case of sports highlights of some hockey games that were played in Madison Square Gardens or the Montreal Forum, would be about a week old when aired in Sydney. However, no one seemed to mind as this was captivating at the time. When I think back to those early days of television and remember the crowds that gathered in front of those stores such as C. Roy Mason, Bonnells, Wright's, Rogers Washer and Appliances and Ashby Radio to name some, that displayed the sets, little did I think what an impact television would have on our lives.

Since that cold November evening in downtown Sydney, a lot of changes have occurred in the way people shop and are entertained. We now have shopping malls within and outside the city, something unheard of back in the 1950's, with numerous stores all under one roof. That one channel on the television has erupted into anywhere from four to hundreds depending on whether you have cable or a satellite dish. Oh yes satellites, well that's another story.

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Getting back to the TV, it's all live and interactive and in living colour. The size has ballooned upwards to giant screens for homes and stadiums and are digital, plasma, flat screen and hold on there is probably something new coming next week. Most if not all of those stores that first displayed television sets in their windows have either closed or have relocated to the malls and the comfort of indoor shopping.

With the advent of the Internet, another new technological advancement in communications, we are able to log on to computer sites that allow shopping from within our own homes. While I holler to my wife to turn down the thermostat, I proceed to a new site on the Internet that features virtual shopping, and as I check out what's new in golf clubs, I say to myself, "I don't think I'll ever window shop in the fall, anytime soon, well not outside anyway."

### **THIN ICE, A DOG, AND A LESSON LEARNED**

It was the spring break from school and young Todd had come back to Cape Breton with his mom and dad and younger sister, to visit his grandmother who still lived on the island. Last summer he had a great time visiting with his nanny and looked forward to his first winter visit.

That summer before, he had so many things to keep him busy and many days playing in the water with a few of the neighboring children. In the evenings after supper, he and nanny would walk along the shore line of the beautiful Bras D'Or lakes near the tiny hamlet of Boisdale. He was only six then, but he liked the evening walks with his nanny and her large, black Labrador retriever, Maxine. She was a most wonderful and playful dog as she pranced in front of them with a large stick held firmly in her strong jaw.

**The walking wasn't the best, as the beach wasn't sandy like Todd's, back home.** It was rough with some large and small round rocks scattered throughout the coarse sand, that they seemed to be imbedded in. They would walk up the beach about a half mile in the direction of the Grand Narrows bridge, and then return home. Some evenings they saw eagles soar over head and of course squirrels running up the trees that grew between the highway, the railway tracks, and the lake. After looking both ways at both the railway tracks and the road that were in front of the old homestead, Todd ran up the path to his nannies house, with the big dog just ahead of him, he would holler with joy to his mom and dad and sister Bev, who were usually sitting on the front verandah, enjoying the evening air and the spectacular view.

He would tell them of all the things that they had seen and heard in the quiet summer evening, as they walked along the lake shore. He told them of the sounds that they had heard, of frogs croaking and of crows squawking, and of the singing of the robins and the chorus of the peepers and the lonely cry of the loon and on one evening the hoot of an owl in a tree close to the water. Nanny was quick to

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point out the names of the familiar summer sounds as they were heard. He was learning a lot about nature in the country and life was wonderful.

Being so young he never experienced winter around grandmas house and this March break the family decided to head down to see her. The last of the snow had just about gone, but there was lots of ice out in the lake. When asked to go to North Sydney with his mom and dad and sister, to pick up some groceries, Todd thought that he would like to take a short walk after lunch along the shore with nanny and her dog Maxine.

**Although there was no snow on the ground, and nanny's house so close to the frozen lake, it was cold. "A minus 9" I heard her say as we bundled up and headed down the path over the road and railroad tracks and onto the beach. It didn't seem cold with the sun out in all its glory and warmth.**

As they headed up the beach, Nanny decided that they would go only half the **distance they used to do last summer. They didn't hear any sounds of birds or** things; it was really quiet. The odd car or truck could be heard up above on the old highway. As they made our way along the rocky beach, Maxine for some unknown reason, ran out onto the ice surface and had gone a little ways, when the ice gave way under the weight of her large body.

She let out a howl and started lifting her front paws frantically in an effort to climb back up onto the ice surface. Nanny was in a panic and she knew that she needed help, now.

She thought of running for help and leaving me to watch the dog, but she knew **that Maxine wouldn't last. Luckily she had her cell phone in her coat pocket and** called her neighbors house for help. Gerard MacBurnie and his wife Unice, were just heading out the door for some shopping in North Sydney. Nanny told Gerard what had happened and where they were. Within minutes Gerard, a volunteer fireman with the Boisdale fire department, knew just what to do. He quickly arrived with 2, two by fours and a coil of rope, that he retrieved from his backyard garage.

He threw the rope towards the dog, and he ventured out onto the ice on his belly sliding along the thin ice towards the thrashing dog when one of the boards became stuck in the ice. He continued on with just one board, when suddenly he went through the ice, just as he neared the now panicked animal. Luckily the tide was out and he found himself in water that was only up to his waist. He reached out for the rope and made his way to Maxine and tied the rope to her collar. He lifted her front paws up onto the ice and got behind her and heaved her onto the ice. Nanny held the other end of the rope and pulled hard as she could until the dog was able to get up and walk to the beach, shaking herself and her coat of matted icy water at the same time. Gerard gingerly got himself back up onto the ice surface and with his one two by four made his way back to the beach.

All of this took about ten minutes but seemed like hours. They made it up the bank to the road and the warm waiting car, with Unice behind the wheel. Gerard said

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that he wasn't really that cold except for his hands and fingers which felt frozen. Nanny couldn't thank him enough for all his help.

Unice seeing that there was no traffic coming either way made a quick U turn on the old road, and made it back to their house. Gerard changed into dry clothing and put his hands on the warm radiators to get feelings back in his hands and fingers. Unice passed a large towel to Nanny, and she rubbed down the frozen dog and then Unice drove us home.

Later that evening, they all headed down in dad's van to Gerard's house to see if he was all right. Except for a few cuts on his forearms from the rough edges of the ice as he climbed out of the water, he told us his hands and fingers had thawed out and that he was feeling great.

Todd's father and mother along with nanny and my sister thanked Gerard for saving Maxine from drowning, as it was a very tense moment when it all took place that afternoon, his father remarked, "it had taught Todd a very valuable lesson in life. That although ice looks safe in the last weeks of winter, it usually is not." "I know that now dad," replied Todd, and added "boy do I have a story to tell my class mates when we get home."

And as he looked at the big dog wagging her tail and her big smile, Todd grabbed Maxine around the neck with a big hug, as they all laughed out loud.

### DREAM

The daylight pierced the dark shadows of my mind,  
as I awakened to somber thoughts of some far away fear,  
etched there through the night, but now so vague.  
I groped with the subconscious of what had transpired  
in the dream that passed before.  
Only aware now, of the quiet hospitable room where I lay,  
and thinking of the Star of Bethlehem,  
engraved on top of a sphere so golden,  
not unlike that of a harvest moon,  
transfiguring all of my previous thoughts.

### THE SYDNEY ROUNDHOUSE

With the age of Steam, not so long ago.  
They built a new roundhouse, down where the harbour waters flow.  
With mighty, almost two foot square beams,  
the structure was built to last forever, it seems.

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As the tides of time swept by behind,  
mighty steel horses from freights came to find,  
a place to be replenished, fueled, and cleaned,  
as craftsmen and labourers, contributed to the national dream.  
Over the years in the small pits below,  
as the locomotives were all lined in a row,  
brake shoes were replaced, and nuts and bolts tightened,  
yet, Sydney roundhouse crews always seemed frightened.  
Of talks of a new engine, so fuel efficient,  
that would cut back all jobs, even before any attrition.  
Now with just a skeleton work crew, and engines all new,  
it would seem that their fears, had all been too true.  
As I look at the place where the roundhouse once stood,  
I think of how evil has won again, over good.  
**Yes, they tore down the roundhouse in Sydney's north end,**  
and the end of an era has come, with the demise of a friend.

Rowe Rudderham

*Born in Sydney, N.S.*

*Brought up on a farm in Point Edward, went to a school in Point Edward, from Grade Primary to Grade 9, ½ a mile away.*

*I went to Riverview the first year it opened. Lasted a year and a few months.*

*Worked on a farm, as I was needed, as my other brother went to Agriculture College. When he came back, I went to Sydney looking for a job, as I did not like working on the farm 7 days a week. I got a call from Cape Breton Dairy very soon. I made \$30.00 a week, which was good money then. 43 years later, I took early retirement. A good move! I recommend it to all people.*

*I liked sports; mostly hockey and softball. Many good memories. I now play darts and help run card games: 45's and Tarbish for different organizations.*

## Among Our Souvenirs

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### THE WORLD WAR 1939 – 1945

Going to school as a young boy at Point Edward we were asked to bring old car or truck tires to school as later a army truck would come to pick them up. The inside of cigarette packages were also saved.

In the evening neighbour kids would join our family and sit on the shore line and try to count war ships in the harbour.

The harbour would be so full of ships we could not count them all. Two days later they would be all gone out to sea.

Some nights the lights would blink telling everyone to shut off all lights as enemy planes were near.

Many days we would watch sea planes dropping light bombs on targets in the harbour.

However one day the pilot pressed the button too soon and the bomb went through my uncle house and damaged the whole house. Luckily they were outside when it happened. It made headlines.

About 9 P.M. my father would listen to the radio as Wilson Woodside would describe how our troops were advancing that day.

One winter they set up a training camp way back in the woods. It was off the backland road which was the old road through to Edwardsville.

They would ski down to our house at night and put their skis along the side of the house. They would wash up and make a few phone calls. The shelter could be seen many years later.

**During war years my mother's church guild and others would gather to make socks and mitts etc. They would send them over seas with soap and other items.**

The ones that received parcels would return a letter of thanks and it would make everyone happy.

After the war ended and the vets returned the church people got together to have a welcome home party, tables were set up in our orchard. Many events were held and we had a ball game in our hayfield. We had one bat and one ball and one glove that was not fit to use. Everyone had lots to eat and a lot of good stories to tell all.

**One neighbour did not return and that was on everyone's mind: "Ernie Hill".**

One soldier said there would not be another world war but there would always be

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smaller wars. So far, so good.

**I talked to the soldier's mother many years later. She said she was getting a \$10.00 check every month since the war ended. Not much for the loss of a son.**

I also asked my mother who was going to win the war she said we were, as we were the good people.

### LULU

**As a youngster living on a farm in the 40's, my favourite pet was a horse named Lulu.**

**Lulu came to my father's farm in Point Edward from the coal mine in Glace Bay.** She was too big to be used as a pit pony, and had received many injuries hauling coal up from the mine shafts.

Lulu became my favourite pet animal, as she was very quiet and friendly. I used to brush and curry-comb her to make her look better.

Once a year in the spring, I would walk her down the road to the Blacksmith to get new shoes. I would be there all morning, but that was better than working home.

As I grew older, I would put a harness of Lulu and hitch her up to a sleigh or dump cart. She was anxious to get outside for exercise, especially in the winter time. I would give her special treats once in a while, like oats or vegetables.

There were two other horses I the barn: Gigi and Roxy, but they were not as friendly.

Later years, Lulu would lie down in her stall and she could not get up by herself. I knew the end was near.

**A neighbour cousin who came back from the war had a gun; a "German Luger". I saw him and my older brother taking Lulu back to the very back field. I heard later it took all six shots to bring her down. She was cremated later, but I did not attend.**

I lost my true friend and never forgot Lulu.

I think horses and humans are closest to think and work together.

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### PERSONAL ADVENTURE

As a teenage boy on a farm in Point Edward each winter we had to go to a creek or quarry pond to get blocks of ice to cool milk in the summer time. The ice was put in a separate building and covered over with sawdust. We used a truck to carry the ice from pond to storage area. We used a long saw to cut the ice and ice tongs to pull the ice out of the water. As some left with a load, some stayed to saw up some more ice.

**We were told to be careful, but it didn't work, as I slipped and fell in the water. My head did not go under, but I was lucky someone was with me. He used ice tongs to pull me out. As I lay on ice, wet and cold, waiting for the truck to return, I wondered what would have happened if I was there alone. The truck made an "extra trip home."**

Another time, as I was standing on ice, my feet got so cold I had to start walking home through the woods.

However, as I walked, my feet got better and were all right when I got home.

This was the Quarry Pond way back in our back field, where during the war one summer, four service ladies known as "**WRENS**" went for a swim. They did not know how deep the pond was and they could not swim. Three of them drowned.

### STORMS

**The storms I remember are from 1950 on. Snowstorms were bad in the 50's. If the harbour off Point Edward was frozen, the snowstorm brought a lot of drifting from the east from high winds. It would block the road for days. As the roads were so narrow, there was not much room to put the snow.**

One storm I remember around that time, the dairy farmers were blocked and could not get their milk tanks to Sydney. My brother picked up the cans, but he was snowed in also. Around noon that day, he took off the dual wheels and put chains on the back tires. We called a few neighbors and set out up the road. As we shoveled through big drifts, many people joined us. We all stayed on the back of the truck until we got stuck, and then jumped off to shovel. We cleared the road halfway through the Barren Road (now Keltic Drive).

Coming back, traffic started to move. They appreciated what we did, as they had to get to town also.

Another big snowstorm was in 1967. The roads were plowed better then. I delivered milk in this area. Frenchvale had one lane for a week. If you met someone, you had to back up to a driveway, to pass. The Rudderham Road was blocked for over a week. A highway snowblower had to come from Halifax to open

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the road. We drove under some drifts.

### VETERANS

Remembrance Day is a day that should not ever be forgotten.

I have a next-door neighbor, a veteran of the last world war. He cannot travel much, so he does not go to Westside Legion for the ceremony. I heard a story from him that he was trapped in a trench for almost a week in the same clothes and very little food.

These stories should not be forgotten, as those overseas had a very tough job to save our country. Not many war veterans left as war ended 62 years ago.

Why did British Isles join the U.S. to fight Iraq? If the U.S. did not join the World War when they did, England would not have survived. They returned the favour.

### POINT EDWARD SHORE

Other things I remember as I was growing up in Point Edward. The beach below the farm was a favourite play spot. The gravel was good for making cement and many other uses also.

Many people would come to get gravel. One person paid for a lot of land. He had a large truck and shoveled all the gravel on by hand. It took hours to load, but he kept coming back.

One year, my father, with help, built a crib out from the shoreline. It would bring more gravel to shore. However, as harbour ice would drift down, the ice would pile up along the shore and the force was so strong, it tore up the crib work.

The May 24<sup>th</sup> Holiday, we had to go in the harbour for a swim. Some years, the water was very cold. We were told ice was in the harbour one year, but they went in anyway.

Later, we had a boat, so we built lobster traps and we needed bait. On a calm day we would go out in the boat with hay forks to catch flat fish. We could see them as they were close to shore. Some fish would slip off the fork, but we would get enough for a few days.

Now the shoreline still looks good, but not very many people go swimming.  
**“Pollution from Sydney Harbour.”**

The old road I traveled on is now 90% gone. It is hard to find any signs of the road.

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I am still looking for Captain Kidd's Treasure which was buried along the shoreline, so the story goes.

### I REMEMBER THE TIME ...

I remember the time I was playing in the harbour below our house. There were 3 or 4 of us jumping ice clammers along the shoreline. The wind came up and luck was that

I had a long pole in my hands when I started drifting out to sea. I had to reach under water to push the clamper to shoreline. If I did not have the pole, I would have gone out to deep water and not be coming back, as the clamper was not very large. That ended jumping clammers for a while.

My friends who were with me were very good at this sport. We also played Champ in the marsh by the school. We would run across thin ice. The bravest person who stayed dry was the Champ. Many of us had to go into school soaking wet to the waist. We sat as close to the stove as possible, trying to get dry at school, as we were not allowed to go home until end of school-day.

### FEAR

The kids I played with all had good parents, so there was no fear there.

Nowadays, most people have a fear of dying. I tell them I had a good, long life and my only worry would be my 3 sons having to come from Vancouver for my funeral.

My only wish would be if I could meet my old friends and relatives who passed away years ago. I know it is not possible, but they were better people around then than the ones around today.

I predict that in 50 years, hospitals will have extra rooms for used body parts to keep people alive longer. Just like a garage for car parts.

The old people were more friendly, helpful, good neighbors and not having money on their minds all the time.

### A TRIP

Many years ago, my father, who owned a  $\frac{1}{2}$  ton truck, decided one Saturday to drive up to Point Michaud. The whole family piled in the back of the truck with extra lunch and headed St. Peters way. When we got there, we saw the beautiful Sand Beach.

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We all went for a swim and a few hours later, headed home. I was very young then, but I did not forget the trip as the beach was beautiful.

Many years later, my family was away, so I decided to drive up to see the beach again. I remembered the beach was on the left side of the road. As I got close to St. Peters, I took a left turn and headed up a long country road. I was not sure where I was going but I kept going in the direction of the shoreline.

Later, I was going up a long driveway when I realized I was not on the right road. I saw an old house on a close field. I left the truck by the woods and walked over to see the building.

The old house had no doors or windows on it, so I took a walk inside. Halfway across the floor I heard a big crash. The whole floor went down to the basement and I went with it!

I was badly hurt and jammed under beams. I could not move, so I started to holler, hoping someone would be close enough to hear me. No one came that night.

The next day I heard a dog outside, so I hollered again for help. The kid who owned the dog looked inside so I told him I needed help. He left, but he did not come back until many hours later with another child. I told them I was badly hurt and asked them to get help and bring some water, as I was getting very thirsty.

That evening, help arrived, but they got more help before they tried to get me out.

After getting me out, they took me to a hospital, as I had many injuries. My family did not have a clue where I was until I called them.

I did not get to Point Michaud since I was 5 years old - - - and I am not going back now!

## THANKFULNESS

We should all be thankful that we live in one of the best countries in the world. As for Cape Breton, most properties have good soil for farming and many other uses. Most farms have a brook or spring going through their property.

We should be very thankful that the sun rises every day and we have plenty of water, as no one would survive without either. We have good weather, but we are lucky as compared to other countries. Now all we can do is complain about it.

I am thankful for my parents who brought us up, and now, for my wife and children, who are there when we need them. My only hope is to have a lot of friends and no enemies when I leave this land.

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As one person said "Everyone has troubles, but some have more than others." However, we can be thankful we can talk about them.

### CHRISTMAS

The real meaning of Christmas is not always brought up. In my opinion, there are a lot of great people who should be recognized who saved lives in the last number of years.

**Christmas is a great time for kids, as you don't forget your younger years.** As you got older, you were told about who was the real Santa Claus. After that, Christmas was never the same. The saddest time was Christmas night.

A few years ago I was going in to church with my wife. A neighbour was going in at the same time. We met a friend inside. He asked me how I was since last Christmas. I took it as a joke, but my neighbour did not like the comment.

A minister who visited our home when I was young told a few stories. Two older sisters used to send \$10.00 to each other at Christmas. They later increased it to \$20.00. Later, they agreed to cut it out, as it was getting too expensive!

One Saturday night, this person was trying to use the phone. It was a party line. He **got tired of waiting, so he said: "I smell the beans burning!" They both hung up, as this was a regular Saturday night meal.**

### OLD AGE, HEALTH, RETIREMENT

As I was getting close to retirement, I noticed older people who were retiring. Some kept active as they quite their steady jobs. But the thing I noticed was that the seniors who retired and did very little, a few years later were gone!

I told many people over the years that they had to have a reason to get up the next day; to exercise, or have little jobs to do to keep active. As I get older, health is the main problem for most. It is not much fun in our "golden years" if we are not well enough to enjoy our regular ways.

As I worked hard through many years in my life, I had a lot of back trouble. Finally, I made arrangements with the company I worked for to have an operation. I gave up six months of work, but it was the best thing I ever did. I wore a cast for four months and I could not sit down in all that time.

I saw my doctor after it was over (Doctor Greenlaw). He knew what I was going to ask: could I play ball any more? He told me I could do whatever I wanted, but to be careful.

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Before the operation, I was sent to Halifax for a second opinion. They told me we had the best doctor this side of Montreal. He wanted the whole floor in the Sydney Hospital for his patients. They would not give it to them, so he moved to California.

Nowadays, I can't wait until the twenty-eighth of the month for pension cheques to arrive! They are not that great, but good enough to carry on.

I remember many years ago, an old farmer told me to always be in debt, and I would have a reason to keep working!

Now when I wake up in the morning, I try to think what day it is. Then I remember what I did the day before, or where I was the night before, to figure it out. The mind, along with everything else, is getting worse.

## Kathy MacCuish

*Being the facilitator of the Sydney Writing Circle has been different from any other teaching that I have done during my career as an educator. There were all the usual tasks, of course: research and planning for each session, daily preparation and the administrative stuff.*

*But, there was an added wrinkle. In order for the Circle to work, I had to write, too. Over the years, I have done a lot of writing - letters, memos, grant proposals, reports and so on, but I had never really thought of myself as a WRITER. So, I became one. A lot of what I have written over the year has been so much drivel, but the pieces that have been included here are special. With the exception of "Starting Over", they are about my family and I hope that you, Dear Reader, will find them interesting.*

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### GROUND HOG DAY

Today is Ground Hog Day. 108 years ago today, Anna Christine Childs was born to Catherine Anne and Christopher Childs, who lived in Mill Creek, on the outskirts of Buctouche, New Brunswick. Kif worked at a big sawmill in Buctouche and he and Catherine farmed, as well. Anna eventually had three sisters and one brother and they all lived together on the banks of the creek until, at the age of 17, Anna finished her formal education and obtained a special teaching license. She then left home to become the teacher in Birch Ridge, a small community about 30 miles away on the main rail line.

In Birch Ridge, Anna met a young man named Walter Steeves. He was the youngest in a large family who had settled the community sometime after the middle of the previous century and had prospered by lumbering. However, around the turn of the century, the family suffered financial reverses in a recession and were no longer so prosperous. Walter wanted to work on the railroad, but because he was the youngest son, he had to stay home and take care of his parents and their farm. **In 1918, Walter and Anna married. They were my father's parents.**

Anna was a smart, hard-working woman – the kind who could turn her hand to almost any task. In my first memories of her, she would have been about 50 years of age. She was not tall, stocky, with blue eyes and gray hair that she wore gathered in a knot at the back of her neck. She always wore a dress and an apron and black oxford style shoes with Cuban heels. She was always busy. She did all kinds of work, from maintaining the old house in which they lived, to preparing all their meals, baking and preserving, churning by hand and making butter, growing vegetables and flowers, barn chores, washing and shipping wool that had been sheared from their own sheep, making her own clothes and knitting, quilting and **doing "fancy work" in her spare time. Sunday afternoon was her** time to read. And every evening after the chores were done, there were games of cards.

Anna was also the Birch Ridge Postmistress. Three times each week, the neighbours would gather in her kitchen with their outgoing mail for my grandfather to take out to the train. He would come back with the new mailbag and folks would wait patiently while she sorted its contents, so they could go home with their newspapers and letters. She was a wonderful hostess and I remember the big old kitchen table surrounded by what seemed like dozens of people who had "dropped in" on a summer Sunday afternoon and of course stayed for supper, which always included her justifiably famous biscuits and molasses cookies.

Anna was not a happy woman – I don't remember a lot of smiles. She was bitter and seemed unfulfilled. I know that she loved me and was proud of my accomplishments, but I always sensed that she felt I could have done better or have been more attentive to her. She never said so, but I am sure that she often regretted her decision to marry Walter. She could have accomplished so much, had she been born in a different time and place or had made some different decisions. **One consolation, especially after my father's early and untimely death, was that,**

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sometime in the 20's, her parents had moved from Mill Creek to a farm about one-quarter of a mile down the road. Every day after the noon meal was finished and the essential chores done, Anna would walk down the road and visit with her mother and unmarried sister for a while.

**Walter and Anna's life was not an easy one. Money was always in short supply.** Unless Walter could get some work on a road-building crew, often their only sure cash money was the post office stipend. They lived without electricity and running **water until 1957.** One of Anna's most prized accomplishments was the installation of the small bathroom with its lavender fixtures in a small space at the top of the stairs in the old house.

In the late 60's Walter and Anna decided to sell the old place. His health was not good and eventually it was discovered that he had lung cancer - he died in 1970. Walter built a new little house for them beside the big oak tree across the road **from the old place.** After Walter's death, Anna lived there for another ten years or so, until she sold it and moved into Moncton to live in a small apartment in a **seniors' building.** She stayed there for a number of years until she suffered a stroke and went to live in a care facility. She was never contented with her situation and somehow managed to move from facility to facility until, shortly before her 98<sup>th</sup> birthday, she had a fall and succumbed to pneumonia.

I think of my grandmother often, but always on Groundhog Day. She taught me so much - not only practical things, but many life lessons as well. From her example, I learned that when you make a choice or a decision, you have to live with its consequences. And that there is no point bemoaning your fate - things are what they are. It was also from her example that I learned the secret of happiness - which is this: you - and you alone - determine whether or not you are happy. It is not where you live, the size of your bank balance, your weight or the identity of your friends - it is learning to be happy where you are and changing those things that you can. So, to me, Groundhog Day is not about six more weeks of winter. It is about being happy and contented with your life, even though winter may seem to never end.

### BIRCH RIDGE RECOLLECTIONS

In the 1950's, Birch Ridge was a wonderful place for a little girl to visit. I can't remember ever being bored there, but I am sure that I must have been. As I cast back my mind's eye, I am surprised to be able to say that, because there really was not a lot there.

Birch Ridge was, and still is, a straight stretch of New Brunswick Highway #126 about 10 km in length, running between Coal Branch and Canaan Station. There are no side roads, just the highway. At the time I am remembering it was unpaved and there were probably about 20 dwellings along this stretch of road, with nothing but dense woods and peat bogs behind the cleared fields. And, of course, there

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was the CNR main line, running parallel to the road on its west side.

**My grandparent's farm was about 200 acres** – a mixture of hayfields, pasture, vegetable garden, orchard and bog. It was easy to find – you simply had to follow the road until you saw the maroon railroad shanty that bore the Birch Ridge sign and then make a left turn into the driveway and cross the tracks and there you were, in the main yard surrounded by gray unpainted wooden shingled buildings. Starting on your left hand and moving clock-wise, the first building was the house. It was a typical 2 story L shaped farmhouse, the ell having only 1 story and being the summer kitchen. Continuing to move clockwise, next was a big 2 story shed – the former summer kitchen – this is where the milk separator and the gas powered **washing machine lived in the summer**. The “little house” was behind it. Then came the granary and the barn, with the garage across the yard from the house. The orchard was between the garage and the tracks.

There always seemed to be lots to do. There were always kittens, who sometimes let me take them for rides in the wagon my grandfather had built for me. My doll and I could have tea parties – the main course was often pineapple weed blossoms or, perhaps butter and egg blossoms. I could explore – **as long as I didn't go out of the main yard**. With accompaniment, I could visit the cattle in the barn and supervise the milking, or visit the sheep in the pen. When I got bigger, I helped weed the garden and with the haying. Sometimes Grandad and I walked back over the hill to check on the overflow – an artesian spring that bubbled merrily away. It was a bad thing if the overflow dried up. I also helped with the housework – dusting down the stairs with the turkey wing duster was always my chore – and it was in the big kitchen that I developed my love of sweeping. If I was good, I could **play the pump organ in the parlour or the “room” as it was known**. I had learned enough about reading music in school that I could pick out simple hymns and could pass hours that way. Normally, the room was reserved for special guests and for passing through on your way upstairs to bed. When the weather got cold, the door between the room and the kitchen was always kept closed to conserve the heat that came from the big kitchen range.

Life was lived in the kitchen. Not only were meals prepared and consumed there, it was the post office, the sewing room, the reading room and the card room. Along with the big square table and at least 10 matching press-back chairs, there was my **grandmother's old handmade rocker, the small rocker that matched the other** chairs and the couch. And there was a big battery operated floor model radio under the window by the couch.

**The couch was Grandad's spot. He would stretch out there after supper and the** evening chores with his stocking feet next to the stove, perch his glasses on his nose and read. Walter Steeves – Grandad – **was a real character. He wasn't very** tall and could be described as wiry, I guess. He was bald except for a white fringe, had a big nose – the curse of the Steeves family – and piercing blue eyes. He loved to tease and to dance. I can still see him in the middle of the kitchen oilcloth, step dancing to the fiddle music coming from the radio. Grandad could turn his hand to almost anything. I still have and use a blanket box that he made for Anna and a

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little desk that was my father's Christmas present one year. The barn and the garage were his domain. Anna may have ruled the roost, but when it came to the garage, especially, he was the boss. The car lived in the garage next to the workbench. It was never brand new, but it was always in excellent shape and clean and shiny. Walter was the driver. And, so, if Anna wanted to go somewhere further than down the road to her mother's, she had to depend on Walter to take her.

I have great memories of **drives in Walter's car**. Sometimes they were short – trips either up to Coal Branch or down to Canaan for something at the store. Often there were drives to Clareville – take a right at Coal Branch – **to visit Walter's sisters who lived there**. Sometimes we went even further afield. We might go to Rexton – the county seat- **to do some business**. **Or to Buctouche to go to the Irving's big store** there. Once, Grandad and I even went as far as Adamsville to get a puppy. He was named Bimbo and was a good friend for a long time.

**Another Birch Ridge person was Aunt Jessie. She was Walter's widowed sister who lived with her son and daughter-in-law in Moncton and in summer often came to stay for weeks on end.** When she visited, the little rocker in the kitchen was her seat. I liked Aunt Jessie – she was lots of fun and she made delicious doughnuts. **She got under my grandmother's skin and took great delight in doing so.** And there was Elwood, Walter's uncle, who lived on the next farm up towards Coal Branch with his daughter and her family. He was a funny old guy – not very clean, as I recall.

Anna's mother, Catherine Anne, after whom I am named, was another Birch Ridge notable. Not being a native, she felt entitled to comment on everyone and everything. I often thought her face must have hurt, because her white hair was **scraped back so tightly into its bun.** Lucy, her daughter and caregiver, Anna's younger sister, was also a fun person. She had lived in Boston for many years until her mother had decided she was dying – more than 20 years before the fact – and demanded she come home to comfort her last days. She wore sneakers and smoked. She was not a very good cook, but would often offer what she called patty-pans, plain white cupcakes, accompanied by orange or raspberry drink made by adding flavoured syrup to cool well water. Life in that household was also lived in the kitchen, but there was a dining room, too, with a big round table. The table shared the room with a huge purple oxalis plant that was planted in an old enamel cooking pot. I spent many hours sitting at that dining room table looking at catalogues and the Family Herald while Catherine, Lucy and Anna solved all the **world's problems.**

As a small girl, it seemed to me that things would never change at the Ridge, but change they did. Catherine died in 1963, while I was a first year student at Mt. A. I think that was the beginning of the end. Over the next few years, Anna retired from the post office, she and Walter moved to the little house across the road and the world was never the same again.

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### CROSSING THE CAUSEWAY

Isn't it odd how your perception of something simple can change with the passage of time? Something as simple as, say, crossing the causeway ...

I remember the first time I crossed the Canso Causeway. It was late in the afternoon on an August day in 1958. I was seated in the back seat of our gray 1950 Chevy – you know, one of the fastbacks with the five chrome stripes down the middle of the trunk? My mother and stepfather, George, were in the front seat and my little sister and I were in the back. It was a momentous day. We were leaving Moncton, our home, and moving to Sydney.

George had gotten a new job as a radio technician at the Sydney Airport. It was a big promotion for him. **We knew that we wouldn't be living right in Sydney; that we would be living near the airport in a Department of Transport house. In my mind's eye, I saw a neat little community like the one called Lakeburn, which had grown up around the Moncton Airport during the war.** I thought it would be fun to live in a new community and make new friends. It would be just like home – only different. How wrong I was!

Our new house was one of three clustered together in the middle of the woods on the Sydney side of what is now the Old Airport Road. They were nice enough houses, except for the coal furnaces and the rats that were living under our back step. The rats were banished, but the coal never was. After a few years we moved to another one of the houses – a bigger one, but the isolation never changed. For all the years we lived there, we never had a telephone, except for one that connected the house to the Aeradio office – so George could be called out to work at all hours of the day and night.

My sister and I had to walk up the road each morning to catch an Acadia Lines bus that took us to Reserve Mines to school. Because we were not Catholics, we went to Central School, an old two storied, four room building that served the Protestant population for grades P to 9. School was a particular kind of hell. Think about it. The natural tendency of children to pick at newcomers was combined with the Cape Breton distrust of strangers and the suspicion towards outsiders coming into a small community. Plus, our father worked at the airport and, even though we were sisters, Loraine and I had different last names. To top it off, she was painfully shy, I was soon the top student in the school and our mother was an attractive, well-groomed and well-dressed redhead. What a recipe for disaster! Loraine and I eventually made some friends, even though they all lived what seemed in those days to be miles away. After grade nine, I went to the Academy, but that was really not much better.

**Every summer, on George's vacation,** we made our annual pilgrimage to Moncton. We would drive down route four and cross the Causeway, heading west. How wonderful it was to escape Cape Breton, if only for a short while! To see family and friends, to be in the city for a few days, to escape the dampness and the coal dust,

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to feel welcomed. The return trip was always filled with sadness. Sure, we were **going back to our own house and our own things, but the welcome wasn't there** and we were leaving our family behind.

Over the years, **things didn't seem to change much. I left home as soon as I could**, going to university in New Brunswick and then to work in Ontario. So, for another seven years, the crossing west was the good one and the crossing east was always accompanied by the thought: "How long until I can escape again?"

But then things started to change. George died and I got a job teaching at **Riverview Rural High and came "home" to be with my mother and sister. And then** a funny thing happened – I met a man – a nice man - and before I knew it, I was married to him. He had been born and brought up in Glace Bay and had no intention of ever leaving Cape Breton. He had only ever been away from the island to visit relatives in Boston and a friend in California. So, all of a sudden, Cape Breton was home and the feelings associated with the causeway crossings began to change.

Now, I am like all good Capers. Even though getting off the island at intervals is still necessary for my continued good mental health, trips to Moncton are no longer **trips "home". Home is here. My heart swells with contentment when we head** down the hill at Aulds Cove and see the wonderful green of the Creignish Hills across the water of the strait. Even though I know we still have a two hour drive ahead of us **on roads that haven't changed a lot since the first time I drove over** them almost fifty years ago, the crossing east still means I have come home.

So, time really does change things, doesn't it?

## MY TRAVELING FAMILY

Last Tuesday afternoon, we had an interesting discussion as we tried to decide on a "home-writing" topic or theme for this week. I had originally suggested we write about "thanksgiving", but that didn't strike a chord with some people. So, we did some brainstorming and voting and eventually settled on "travel" as a theme. Among the suggestions we discarded were: dreams, out-migration and genealogy. **This morning, as I snuggled under my cozy quilt, the answer to the question "what will I say about travel?" came to me in a flash.**

First of all, let me say that compared to many people these days, I have never **really "traveled". That is not to say that I have never wished to "travel", just that** for many reasons it has not often been possible for me. However, many of my ancestors traveled long distances at a time when travel was neither easy nor convenient. They were out-migrants from their native lands and they traveled to realize their dreams. And, when they arrived, they gave thanks.

My ancestry is what one could call "mixed European". My forefathers (and

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mothers) originated in various parts of Britain and in Germany. My maiden name was Steeves, which is an Anglicization of the German "Stief". Other names in my family past are Eagles, Lewis, Morrison, Cameron, Childs and Fawcett. As my daughter says: "we were peasants". As peasants, they came to this new land to fulfill their dreams of a better way of life.

I'm not sure when my mother's Planter ancestors crossed the Atlantic, but I do know they came to Atlantic Canada following the Expulsion of the Acadians in the latter half of the 1750's. They landed on the shores of the Minas Basin and then they walked with all their worldly possessions from there, up over the Cobequid Pass, to a fertile area west of what is now Moncton, and established settlements there. If you know where to look, you can still find Mont Eagle and Lewis Mountain with their small cemeteries and abandoned farms now returning to forest. These folks realized their dreams and owned land. They raised families, prospered and traveled on from their pastoral lifestyle and they gave thanks for their good fortune.

**My father's (and mother's) Stief ancestors came from Germany to Philadelphia** about 1765. Heinrich Stief was a cowherd in Germany and he knew that somewhere there was a better life for him and his family. So, he and wife and his sons – eventually there were seven of them – made the dangerous journey to the new continent. In 1766, they became part of a scheme cooked up by Benjamin Franklin and some of his cronies. They traveled on a ship up through the Bay of Fundy to what is now New Brunswick and then up the Petitcodiac River to land, in mid-July, at the mouth of Hall's Creek, which is not very far from Champlain Place, for those of you who know Moncton at all. Franklin and his pals had received a large land grant and the Stiefs and the other five families who traveled with them were colonists or employees of the group. In return for settling and improving the land to the financial benefit of the Franklin group, the colonists were to be supplied with many of the necessities of life by the landowners. But that never happened. Instead, these travelers were abandoned by the landowners and nearly starved. It was only with the help of the local indigenous people, MicMac Indians, that these folks survived the winter of 1766-67. There is a story of Heinrich and some of his sons appearing in the Bay of Fundy in a dugout canoe the next summer, selling provisions which they had raised to English military ships that were there to visit the English forts that had been established in places like Fort Lawrence.

Like my Eagles and Lewis ancestors, the Steeves family increased and prospered. They, too, eventually left their farms and they, too, gave and still give thanks.

My ancestors with the Scottish names crossed the Atlantic in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were also in search of land they could call their own. They had been dispossessed in the infamous "Clearances", when Scottish landowners evicted their tenant farmers in favour of large flocks of sheep, which were perceived to be less work and much more profitable. The Camerons started out in Port Hood here in our own Cape Breton. Eventually some of them moved on to New Brunswick, apparently to work as ship-builders, where they met up with my other ancestors. They also began their lives in this new land on subsistence farms. They survived, some prospered, some moved on from the land to the towns and to other

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occupations, but they also made a habit of giving thanks.

Aside from the geographical travel of my ancestors, my family has traveled in other ways. My ancestors were all, as I have previously said, peasants. They were simple, uneducated workers of the land. But, as the years passed, as survival became more sure and less of a struggle, there arose dreams of education and **even of professions. Later generations adopted “blue-collar” occupations – I especially note my mother’s father who was a well-respected railroad engineer.**

And one of his brothers became quite wealthy raising foxes for the fur industry. The Steeves descendants have traveled far and wide – **there was even a “Father of Confederation” among them. Later generations have produced many medical professionals, teachers, entrepreneurs, scientists, engineers and even clergy.**

Now, we are all just Canadians. We are fascinated by our genealogy, by the stories of these folks who were migrants from the lands of their birth. We remember how far our families have traveled, not only geographically, but also socially. We remember how their dreams of owning land and being self-sufficient were realized. And, even though it has become ingrained in us all to give thanks for our good fortune throughout the year; each fall, we all officially give thanks.

### TAKING COMFORT

Comfort was my grandfather. His mother must have had a moment of inspiration when she named him, because he inspired comfort – at least he did in me.

Comfort Eagles was born in 1877 in a small community in the hills west of Moncton. It was appropriately named Mont Eagle, because his ancestors had settled there more than 100 years before. He grew up in a large family on a farm, but he obviously wanted more than the farming life, because, as the story goes, he left home at 14 to go to the States to work on the railroad. He eventually returned to Moncton to work on the Dominion Atlantic Railroad (the DAR), which later became the CNR. Sometime around 1910 – I am not sure of the exact year – he married Florence Jane Lewis, who had grown up in another small settlement west of Moncton called Lewis Mountain, which – you guessed it – had been settled by her ancestors about the same time that the Eagles arrived in Mont Eagle. They settled in Moncton.

I have their wedding pictures hanging in my house and Comfort’s tells you that he was a handsome young man. I know that he had red hair – my mother and all her siblings were redheads and they inherited that from him. The picture shows him looking very serious indeed. He and Florence eventually had six children, three boys and three girls. Their first child, Gerald, suffered some brain damage at birth and never walked or talked. He lived until he was 17 and my mother told me that until his death the household revolved around Gerald and his care. Their second child, Eldon, inspired by his older brother, became a medical doctor and ended his

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career as a director in the National Institutes of Health in Washington, DC. Then there were three daughters; Muriel, Edith and my mother Olive, followed by the last son, Harry, who became a railroad man like his father.

Comfort eventually became a railroad engineer – a driver – as they were called. His regular run was north (or west) to Campbellton, where he and his crew would “**lay over**” as they called it in the rest house and then they would return to Moncton the next day. There are pictures around of him in his striped overalls and cap – by this time he was quite portly – with his pipe clenched in his teeth. He looked very impressive. He retired in 1947, when they began to introduce the diesel engines – **I really don't know why, unless it was because Florence was not well** – she died 3 years later. But, even though I have no memories of Comfort in his engineering heyday, there was never any doubt that he had been a railroad man. Until shortly before his death, I never saw my grandfather without his vest and railroad watch, the chain draped across his belly.

**Comfort's pipe was always a source of fascination.** He smoked a lovely aromatic blend – Amphora maybe – and used filling and lighting his pipe as a way of spinning out a conversation and probably thinking about what he was going to say. There were always lots of burnt out wooden matches in the yard and one of the games my sister and I would play when we were there was to see who could find the largest number.

At some point, Comfort and Florence built a house on Stewart Street, a short street **of fewer than 10 houses that runs off the west end of Moncton's Main Street.** At the end of the street there is a patch of ground that my mother called the Tannery Yards and then past that you can see the main rail line coming into Moncton from the west. When they built the house, Comfort had not forgotten his country roots, because he bought 2 lots of land and developed the second into a wonderful vegetable garden. He was known to have one of the best gardens in Moncton. Children were not allowed in – you could only stand on the sidewalk or in the driveway and admire. And, of course there was no question that you ate your vegetables – they were delicious.

**Another legacy of his country upbringing was Comfort's love of the outdoors.** He was a dedicated hunter and fisherman. Every fall there would be at least one deer harvested to help feed his family. And, he loved to fish, especially salmon on the Miramichi. I can remember one time when I was a small girl, that he must have been to the Miramichi and caught a huge salmon – I think I remember 35 pounds. Anyway, he brought it right home to cut it up and freeze it. He stopped on his way in to town to show my mother – it filled the trunk of his car. He became a well-known tie-er of flies. In his later years folks on their way to the Miramichi would stop in on Stewart Street to stock up. He had set up one corner of the upstairs sun porch as his fly-tying spot. There was a big old table with the vise mounted on it and a dresser filled with tied flies on cotton batting in metal cigarette boxes and exotic materials like squirrel tails and feathers and sparkly threads. It was fascinating to watch him at work.

**Comfort's hunting skills were demonstrated in the house.** In the downstairs hall

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was a big hat-rack mounted on the wall. It was a big hardwood plaque on which **been mounted a lovely buck's head** – complete with rack – and four upturned hooves – on which the hats were deposited. Another trophy was the black bear. By the time I remember it, it was up in the rafters of the garage, but if the garage doors were open and you looked up from the right spot in the driveway, you could see it peering out at you. So, it was the source of another wonderful game – one that involved much running and shrieking – being afraid of the bear. When my mother was a little girl, the bear had pride of place in the front hall along side the **staircase. She and Harry eventually wore all the hair off its back with their games of horsey and that's when poor bruin got relegated to the garage.**

Comfort loved cars – **machinery of any kind, I guess.** When he retired in '47, he bought the first in a long string of last cars. This one was a maroon Studebaker with much shiny chrome. I remember it had a dash ornament consisting of three or four concentric chrome circles – just right for a little girl to sit in front of and pretend she was driving. I have memories of many drives with Comfort, especially when he would pull over to the side of the road and drive along slowly looking for deer.

For all that he was a good family man, Comfort was a real gambler. His card skills, I guess, were honed over countless games on lay-overs in Campbellton. My mother has told me that he would sometimes stay out all night playing poker and he **wouldn't come home until he won.** By the time I came along, he had become a Bridge player and he and Aunt Ida – his second wife – would play Duplicate Bridge several times a week. I have memories of going with them at least once to play when I was a student at Mt A. My strongest card memory of Comfort, though, is of the morning games of Solitaire. Each morning, he would get up early, fry up his bacon and eggs, make his coffee and then, after he had eaten, would sit down at the dining room table with his pipe and play precisely 10 games of Solitaire. He would go through the deck only once for each game and then record the number of cards he had gotten up. The table was littered with odd pieces of paper containing his scores, usually shoved under the ashtray to keep them from getting lost.

Comfort was a kind and generous man. He often lent money to a brother in Mont Eagle and got repaid in produce, eggs and such like. My mother remembered going to visit and bags of flour and sugar being delivered as gifts. And he always supported the church. After the war, Harry and his family lived in the house on Stewart Street with him until he and Ida were married and then they built a house of their own. He was fond of his grandchildren and loved nothing better than to take a gaggle of them fishing.

Comfort had a good long life. He died in 1974 at the age of 87 and was much mourned by his many descendants. He had managed to succeed financially, having **paid for Eldon's medical education and leaving some cash to his daughters and the house on Stewart Street to Harry.** He was truly an interesting and unforgettable character.

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### STARTING OVER ...

As I was contemplating this week's theme, I chanced to feel the need for a piece of gum, so I ventured into my purse to find one. And there I found – along with the gum – the answer to my dilemma – the direction to take with this theme.

I had thought about detailing all the times in my life I have made major changes and hence started over, but that was just too tedious to even think about, let alone write on. I had thought of trying to pen a moralistic saga – aimed at children or perhaps not – about the positive side of being able to start over. I had even thought of writing about starting over as a kind of luxury, but eventually decided not.

The gentleman listeners to this screed may not be able to identify or even understand the point of this exercise, but the ladies certainly will – I mean to explore starting over from the viewpoint of THE NEW PURSE.

To begin – there is the struggle to even find a new purse – one that is just exactly right. It goes without saying that there is no such thing as ONLY ONE PERFECT PURSE – because the purse or bag that is perfect for one woman is highly unlikely to be perfect for anyone else. Each woman has her own idea of the perfect purse.

To begin – the purse must be the right size and shape and, of course, capacity. Some women feel it necessary to carry many things with them everywhere they go; others need only a few. So, the right purse must comfortably carry all the things **the wearer needs on a regular basis, but can't be so big so that things get lost inside.**

Then there is the question of how you carry your purse. Do you carry it over your left forearm, like the Queen, or do you hoist it on your shoulder? Maybe you like to wrap your fingers around a small handle or, perhaps just tuck it under your arm, without the benefit of a strap of any kind. I, personally, like to wear my purse over my right shoulder and across my chest – much in the manner of a Mexican revolutionary wearing a bandolier. This allows me to shop (or whatever) with both hands free and still keep from losing the damned thing. This style of purse wearing brings its own problems, though – that of the correct strap length. The **strap can't be too short, so that the bag is tucked up into your armpit, but, conversely, it can't be too long, so that it bangs on your hip and you are unable to reach into it comfortably.**

Once a woman has determined the correct size and style of bag for her, then there is the matter of actually finding one that fits the bill. This will no doubt require much shopping. Most bags in stock in any given store will not be suitable. To start with, they will not be the correct size and style. And even if they are, they are almost certainly guaranteed to be made of the wrong material or be the wrong colour or, even more serious, be at the wrong price point. None of us wishes to be seen using a bag that is obviously plastic. And, on the other side of things, there

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are very few of us who can justify a three-figure price for a bag in which to drag around our belongings.

However, let us assume that the ideal bag has been found and purchased. Now comes the starting over part. Unless the new bag is completely identical to the one that has preceded it, the user must decide the proper location within the bag for all the bits and pieces. This often requires a long process of trial and error.

Personally, I have been known to rearrange my possessions several times before I have been satisfied with their placement. To me, it is most important that items be placed in their most efficient location, with the wallet being in the spot easiest to hand and the least looked for items, like the band-aid and safety pin, in the bag's deepest recesses.

**It has been known for a new bag to turn out to not be "the one" after all.**

Sometimes, after several weeks of use, an old purse will be determined to be more suitable than the new, shabby though it may be. So, a new starting over cycle will begin, with the retrieval of the old bag from the old bags' drawer or closet and the transfer of the possessions. After years of searching for the holy grail of bags, I have come to the conclusion that it is wise to not discard old bags, because you never know when "the old bag is better than the new" syndrome may strike.

It is always best to be prepared – to start over.

Norma Lou

*Just this and that.*

*Something to think about.*

*How we change our opinions as we get older.*

*I'm using an alias "Norma Lou", that was what I was called when I was young.*

(Editor's note: Norma Lou was a late-comer to the Writing Circle - not joining until the year was almost over.)

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### THE BOOKS

There was a very old lady in my I.O.D.E. chapter. She called and invited me to tea that afternoon. I was surprised, I didn't know her well. We went into her library, where a tea service and scones were laid out. There were two boxes of well worn, but beautifully bound leather books on a table.

She got right to the point. My father was a Presbyterian Minister. He came to Port Morien from Edinburgh, as a young man. He brought with him these books. He used them to teach in a large rural area in Cape Breton. I've kept them, for the day will come, when Gaelic will again be taught in our schools.

We were transferred, leaving Cape Breton. What to do with the books? I told Sister Margaret Beaton the story, and left them in her care.

Years later, when we retired, we returned home. On a beautiful July Sunday, we took a drive, up along the lakes, to Iona. We visited the Highland Village. The view from up there is spectacular.

In the little one room school house, something in a cabinet caught my eye. Beautifully bound leather, well worn books. They had found a most suitable home! That's how it happened.

### THE DANCER

Adonis was no jitterbugger. He was a Jimmy Reeves kind of dancer. We were at the Silver Rail. We danced from ten til two. He sang in my ear, "Put your sweet lips". Oh could he dance, had rhythm you could feel. If you couldn't you were dead from the toes up.

The second date we went to the Chickadee. Over coffee he told me, he was a happily married man. He and his wife believed in an open, free choice kind of life. She is a career woman and I am a traveling salesman. We were old enough when we married to be sensible about feelings. So we lead free choice lives. She as well as me.

I didn't see him again for forty years.

The whole thing happened at a funeral. Adonis turned up at the church, still handsome. All the ladies loved him and he loved all the ladies. There were three or four friends of mine, whom I thought I knew. They welcomed him, obviously knew him extremely well.

I was struck by a wave of jealousy. I told myself it was nostalgia, a longing for my past youth. It was a flaming, deep hot jealousy. Guess I'll have to live with the green eyed monster.

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### CELL PHONES

Are you sometimes amazed at people with a phone at their ear? At a bank or in a grocery store, talking to someone, who I guess, tells him what to get. How much **money to deposit or withdraw. Wouldn't you think that** had been decided before he left home.

Thank heaven they made talking on cell phones illegal while driving an automobile. **Can you imagine your reaction, "He had a stroke." Luckily you didn't drive into a tree.**

Even children, on their way to school, phones stuck to their ears. Walk with a group and talk.

Can you imagine a TV in a car? The scenery is not good enough. I love the **changing seasons. As I get older I don't look happily to winter. But springtime trees** in bloom and new leaves. Summer in her beauty, growing crops, renewal of life. Fall, especially in Cape Breton, hills of red and gold.

I can't remember when we sat down to supper and just talked. Do you really believe, "If you don't use it you'll lose it." Dear God, perhaps they can't speak. I'll ask Jean a question. "Were you expecting a call from Jim tonight?" "I've got an answering machine. What's wrong with you Mom?"

Thank God she can speak.

Let's not even mention computers.

## Malcolm McIver

*I'm retired.*

*Most of my family were avid readers. And while young, reading to me was like entering a strange magical world. There you lived with the native people, rode with the cowboys in the west and walked in spooky caves and houses. It was a place full of dreams, excitement and surprises.*

*Later I was honoured while attending Saint Francis Xavier University to attend the classes of Professor Father Roderick J. MacSween - a published poet, novelist and short story writer. His enthusiasm about literature and its value remains with me today. This love of stories and writing brought me to this marvelous Senior Citizens Writing Class. Here I've learned from all the members of the group. It is exciting, informative and interesting. Also we are truly blessed to have an excellent facilitator Mrs. Kathy MacCuish who guides us along on our writers' journey.*

*I hope you enjoy my stories.*

## Among Our Souvenirs

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### GREATER THAN SPRINGTIME

It is the sixteenth century and on a bright sunny day it happened. A young man is walking in a Public Garden and he loses his senses. The fountains waters are alive with sparkling sun diamonds.

When he turns the corner, past the acacia tree he sees her. She is sitting alone on a wood bench reading a book of poetry. What is wrapped in the eyes of the tall young man with the curious eyes and the long brown hair? What stirs his heart and causes him to design the first greeting card in history?

Maybe it is the magic of the date - the fourteenth of February. Some people, place importance on certain dates, as omens from the gods. And it could be the cloudless blue sky that allowed showers of warm spring sunshine on his broad shoulders and touched his tender heart. It seems he is walking in an enchanted wood.

Or is it the pungent aroma pregnant with exotic perfume of flowers that assail his smell as he strolls in the beautiful gardens.

Did he, like men since, realize love is beyond gender control? For love cuts like a flash of lightning: a glance across a crowded room; a subtle smile in a library; a casual meeting at a dance. It is how love begins. A look, a smile, a face forever fixed in memory. And in that instant wondrous dreams are born.

He watches her on the bench, her haunting large brown eyes on which the sun plays soft shadows from the trees. The colors from her kerchief stand out against her smooth white neck. The shadows merge at the corners of her rich red lips. Suddenly his world is different he is fascinated by the way she tilts her head and tosses her shoulder length dark hair.

Excited, he is lost in thought. Who is this mysterious lady? He had to ask who she is and where she lives.

His heart pounds, a strange sensation for him, for he had never been in love or tasted loves sweetness. Is he misinterpreting it or is he suffering from melancholy or a sadness he hadn't known?

It is peculiar for he feels a part of her, like some mystic bond. Was she a dream, some airy illusion, or was he seeing in her something lacking in himself?

Later, as he walks home all nature is brighter, more alive and he is happier. He is tortured by the words, what can I do about it?

He hurries to his barren room, with its books, pencils and papers. He decides. With haste, he gathers pieces of paper, red lace, scissors, needles and glue. This done, he sits at his drafting table and begins cutting a large heart, then with a brush he

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paints a gold slanted arrow through the red heart. Next he glues the heart on the white square background sheet. His fingers work quickly as he laces the paper with the red ribbon. But what will he write on the paper?

Then as if a magician sprinkled fairy dust on his eyes the world became new, full of hope, of promise and he felt playful, open and fully present. He is almost uneasy with his new gaiety and assigns it to an early spring. For several moments he thinks and then wrote: You are a beautiful lady and you fill my life with happiness, joy and eternal sunshine. He signed it Leonardo.

With a flourish he wrote the address he acquired on the outside of the paper. Then he summoned a boy to deliver the greeting to the address on the paper. Her name is Mona.

Lost in reverie, Leonardo walks around the room. His head is full of dreams, hopes and he wonders if she will return his little gesture of love.

A short time later, the young woman receives the humble token and reads the message. And standing alone by the window, overlooking her garden, Mona Lisa Giaconda smiles her calm, sphinx-like smile.

### IT'S SUCH A BEAUTIFUL DAY

I want you to imagine you are in a special place-**St. Ann's Bay**. It is half-past two on a warm sunny July afternoon. You step off the Englishtown ferry on the Jersey Cove side. And for some unknown reason you turn right. Perhaps it's because you are free of care, are caught in the suns' optimism and have left your worries behind.

After a short leisurely walk you find yourself on the beach. You gaze at the sand then slowly stretch out on the smooth brown sugar beads. Soon you are charmed by the sand's warmth that seeps through your clothes. You are lulled as you watch the small wavelets tapping their lap, lap, lap pulse beat up on the edge of the sand. The waters rhythm has a soothing, lulling, magic effect. Then you feel the air's gentle kiss on your face. You are almost serene in some other world that is so different-so restful, so peaceful and relaxing.

The water in the channel is crystal clear, the surface smooth and it reminds you of the thick piece of green glass that you played hopscotch with as a child. The calm blue sky is decorated with lazy tide-white cotton ball cumulus clouds. They smile and look down gently offering their childlike blessing.

And across the channel on the far shore, tall spruce sentinels stand waiting. The trees silent scent is fresh and breathes a magic of enjoy, relax, be happy for it is a wonderful day.

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As an added attraction three black ducks fly low in regular formation and quack a curious welcome as they hurry home. You can't help but wonder when you glance at your watch, where has the time gone? It's almost five o'clock. Where have you been? in your imagination. Were you lost in a dream, in some strange fantasy or in the splendor of another world outside yourself? Or did you become part of something greater beyond.

Alone on the beach you feel a deep sense of being. You're relaxed and your breathing is deeper, almost effortless. You are at one with nature and are totally refreshed. You were living in the moment of now.

And as you stand and shake off the beads of sand you are slow to leave this hallowed spot. You look around and remember the words of the Poet Wu Men who wrote:

"Ten thousand flowers in spring,  
The moon in Autumn  
A cool breeze in Summer,  
snow in Winter-  
If your mind is uncluttered  
by necessary things,  
this is the best season of your life."

## SOMETIMES ONCE IS ENOUGH

God is merciful. This story has little to do with religion and more to do with the opposite.

It begins in the quaint village of Baddeck in Victoria County. Like every village in those days it resembled the western image of filmdom. Instead of a saloon on the main street; Baddeck had several small stores. And the hall housed a Pool Room on the left side of the street that served as a gathering place in the evenings.

Inside the shop on the right wall newspapers and magazines were displayed and the rich smell of fresh gravenstein apples floated in the air.

In the center of the room and three quarters from the entrance was a pool table. Green shaded lamps hung from the ceiling and complimented the lush green felt on the table.

In the basement is a ping-pong table with benches against the wall to seat those waiting to play. At the time Jacob and me were upstairs watching the men play pool.

Our interest was kindled when the men started talking about how to make beer. It is wartime and liquor is rationed. The nearest liquor store is forty-five minutes away

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in Sydney Mines.

The next day red haired Jacob and me with the dark brown hair discussed the beer making idea. Think of the adventure. In our mid-teens and with little knowledge of how to make beer we saw it as a challenge and asked questions that gave us a general idea of how to do it.

The first problem is where to make it? Not at home, for that would be hastily dispensed with. Then we decided on the ranch. It was a wooded area, an eighth of a mile outside the village. There a number of us played cowboys and Indians in the summer and reenacted the western movie we saw the night before in the Masonic Hall. We even had some that wanted to be the bad guys. There was no TV, Tim Hortons and no McDonalds. We made our own fun.

At the ranch a brook ran beside one of the cow and deer trails. And about seven school bus lengths in there is a flat land on the left side. This is the site of our adventure. Clear water bubbled and swirled along close by in the brook. The water purified by the bright July sunshine.

The next obstacle on our adventure was to get Fleischmann yeast cakes, puncheon **molasses, white sugar and dark raisins. We had saved enough money so it wasn't** hard to get our supplies. For it was not uncommon for mothers to send their children to the store to get the same for cooking.

The one thing lacking was what to put the ingredients in. We settled that by finding an earthenware jug in one of our barns.

The day of the cooking was a clear blue sky – certainly a good omen.

Early after dinner, we set off on our adventure with a hatchet, matches, jug, cups and our supplies. Jacob who is big for his age carried the heavier things.

When we arrived at the site we gathered stones and fashioned them in a circle about three feet across. Then we cut two birch fork limbed branches four feet in length and a small limb to go through the eye on the jug and rest on the two forked limbs. We drove the fork pieces in the ground on the outside of the circle of stones.

Now we come to the delicate part of the adventure: how much yeast, molasses, sugar, water and raisins to put in the jug.

As best as I can recall: one yeast cake, two cups of water, a handful of sugar, a cup of molasses and some raisins. This we repeated until the jug was three-quarters full. We hammered in a birch plug; put some dried twigs and dead leaves under the jug and lit the twigs.

The work done we laid back on the soft brown moss and talked and enjoyed the warm sunshine. We were a thread away from sleep when we heard this awful bang, a sizzling noise and a cloud of yeast, molasses and sugar perfumed the air.

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Oh sad day. The bottom of the jug had let go and the beer ingredients fell on and smothered the fire along with our dream of making beer. Jacob and me looked at the mess, stared at each other and laughed. "Look at it this way" Jacob said. "We don't have to put out the fire."

God is merciful. If our had venture had succeeded who knows what would have happened: two drops of that beer would have killed us quicker than a full jolt from a Tazer gun, or who knows we might have found the cure for some disabling disease. Thus ended the adventure of two soldiers of fortune. Sometimes, once is enough.

### THE AWAKENING

It is at the edge of the town. A ragged field with low growing weeds and slender knee-high timothy. And nestled in the center of the field is a large granite boulder. Dougal Bhan walked there often lately. Somehow his marriage was losing its energy. Maybe it was the loneliness since she was gone. On this day coming on three o'clock, he had finished work on his vegetable garden and had tended Sarah's flower beds.

He went into the house, washed and changed into casual clothes, put on his new Australian sun hat and set off. After thinking for five minutes he came to the conclusion: it wasn't Sarah's fault. She was a real gem and he loved her. - And he wondered--- if it wasn't Sarah's fault where was *he* failing? Strange, how hard it was for a man to admit his own mistakes. He let the setting sun warm his tanned face and the balding patch on the back of his head. His hand fidgeted on the warm stone. It seemed something was guiding his thinking.

For an hour he mulled over the situation and the size of the problem, the grandeur of women in general and Sarah's in particular. "That's it" he said, "it comes to the way we talk --or don't talk. It has to do with something we share". Through his silver rimmed glasses he watched the little brook meander nearby. The clear water gurgled, bubbled and splashed in a cheerful rhythm. Then the answer came to him.

The loneliness began three weeks ago when Sarah went to work at the local A&P store. He was against the idea, but the children had grown and gone off on their own. Sarah needed a change in life, always an active person, she could not sit idle. Now in the evenings, she'd come home, make supper while he watched the T.V. News. It wasn't the money---they had more than they needed.

He came down off the boulder, paced around it several times and stopped. "Of course, it was so simple, I couldn't see it at first" he thought. Dougal remembered: when *he* came home from work she always asked: " How was your day dear?" It showed she cared. She made him feel good, wanted, worthwhile.

It was six o'clock when the door opened and Sarah staggered in with two big bags of groceries. Dougal rushed over, took the bags and said 'let me help you with

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those". He put the groceries away and took her coat and hung it in the closet. Sarah looked at him bewildered. "You all right?" she asked. "Fine as can be" he said "come to the sofa, sit down" and he eased off her shoes and fetched her slippers. "I'll get you a hot cup of tea and I want you to tell me about your day. I'll sit and listen".

When he brought the tea she began. The day started routine. Then, mid-morning, a drunk fell against a pyramid of peach cans that went flying around the floor which they had to gather and stack.

"Were you afraid love?"

"Not until three o'clock, when two men in black hoods entered the store and robbed it".

"That's awful, you must be tired."

"Not tired, but at the time I almost wet my pants".

"No wonder dear" Dougal took her hand and kissed it "you are something else Sarah".

She reached up and touched his arm. "Thanks for listening to me, I needed that. I feel much better".

He smiled and said "I'll have supper ready in a minute. Just sit and sip your tea and relax. I'll call you when supper is ready" he paused and stared at her "you know, this morning when you were leaving for work you could have passed for thirty and I admit I was jealous. You make me proud" and he winked.

"Get on with you, get the supper" she said and her eyes shone.

Maureen MacIntosh

*As a child, I loved listening to adults tell stories. At bedtime, my sisters told some quite imaginative tales. I think that's where my interest in writing developed.*

*I kept a journal for many years.*

*Writing stirs up memories long forgotten and preserves them.*

*Creativity nourishes the soul.*

# Among Our Souvenirs

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## MR. AND MRS. HORTON

### Chapter 1

Mamie Horton was married to Angus, whom she loved with all her heart, but wished **he wasn't such a penny-pincher**. Angus was a very old-fashioned guy who had a very frugal upbringing. He was raised in a small village, where his father was the minister of a humble church. It always seemed to Angus that most of the parishioner, to whom they delivered Christmas baskets, had more than themselves. Even so, Angus was taught to be grateful and contented with his lot in life.

He worked hard as a machinist at an Industrial Plant. Together, he and Mamie raised two daughters, who were now married with careers and doing well. Happiness for Angus now, was coming home to an appetizing meal, prepared by his loving wife. Afterwards, he settled in his easy chair by the fireside and the cares of **the day just melted away**. **That's as lively as life with Angus became and he felt** that his cup overflowth. Mamie on the other hand, felt stifled and longed for some adventure. This is the story of how she achieved one such adventure.

Angus had a habit of emptying his pocket change in the crystal dish on the buffet, **each evening**. **Change didn't seem to have much value to him**. Mamie began to collect this change, and to her surprise, had a considerable amount at the end of the month. So began her first adventure.

One afternoon, she dressed in her finest attire and took the bus to Chinatown. She found a fancy restaurant, went inside, and asked for a secluded table for one. The waiter seated her in a dark corner, a warm glow of light coming from a small decorative Chinese lantern in the center of the white tablecloth. She ordered a bottle of wine, red, medium dry. Angus would be working late; she had lots of time and would savour every moment. The wine would help her relax and loosen up some. Mamie was **middle-aged, quiet, with a reserved manner**. **Maybe, she'd even** flirt a little with the polite and handsome waiter.

**She'd start with wonton soup or dim sum; maybe a spring roll. Moo Guy Pan with shrimp was one of her favourites. In time, she'd try every dish on the menu, as** she was sure she would return. How she enjoyed her middle-of-the-afternoon soiree. **As the staff got to know her, they'd play her favourite music. She'd dream of the many things she'd like to experience and she would, in the future, but that is another story.**

Finally, with flushed cheeks and a jovial spirit, she hailed a taxi for home. Once there, she changed into her casual clothes and was usually asleep by the fireside when Angus arrived home. He was none the wiser about her little escapades but he did notice that his wife seemed happier and more contented these days. He could **feel his heart strings stir and as Shakespeare once quoted, "All 's well, that's ends well.**

## Among Our Souvenirs

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### MR & MRS. HORTON

#### Chapter 2

Monday morning Mamie scooted around her house, attending to the routine chores – bed made, dishes done, laundry on the go. Her mind was preoccupied with the Desperate Housewives show she had viewed on television the night before. She had noticed their colourful and stylish clothes and was thinking a new outfit would help lift her spirit. At 55, one shouldn't rush to get over the hill. That's it, right after lunch, she'd stroll down town where the fancy dress shops were located. No Zeller's or Walmart for her, today.

Early afternoon, Mamie was standing in front of a shop, admiring a colourful print dress displayed in the window. She entered, selected a dress from the rack and was approached by a saleslady who asked, "Would you like a push-up bra to go with that dress? " Now, Mamie had only worn sensible full-support cotton bras all her life. She stared at the pink foam contraption the lady held up, while saying, "You will need this type of support to enhance the neckline."

"Go for it!" she thought and headed for the dressing room with both articles. She had some difficulty getting into the skimpy bra as she was a DD cup but when she slipped the dress on, she understood what the saleslady was saying. After she got over the initial shock of so much cleavage shown, she liked how the dress fit; it made her look younger and gave her a sensuous feeling. She'd take it.

Her spirit was lifted as she crossed the street to the teashop on the corner. She was no sooner seated, when a gentleman at the next table gave a cheery hello and introduced himself as George. Before long, they were chatting like old friends. Mamie glanced at her watch. George, out of the blue, invited her to lunch the following week. He explained that he passed through town on Mondays and would welcome the company at lunchtime. Before Mamie engaged her brain, she replied, "I'd love to!" Then George set the time and they parted.

When Mamie returned home, she tried on her new outfit. Although she was pleased with her purchase, she knew Angus wouldn't be seen in public with her dressed like that. Why, through their thirty years of marriage, he had never seen her naked. She always seemed to be swathed in the sheets. So she hid the garments in the back of the closet for now.

Then she pondered her lunch date. What had possessed her to say "yes"? Oh well, there can't be much harm in a lunch date, can there???

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### TAKING A RISK

My daughter worked in the film industry for seven years but for health reasons had to find something easier. While working at Chapters she decided to take a **Computer Course as her friends in that field were doing well. She'd go to school from 8am to 1 pm and work at Chapter's from 2 till 8pm.** with only two afternoons off a week. It began to take its toll on her.

As I was moving from my apartment in Sydney, I offered to be her chef and bottle washer for nine months. She loved the idea but was afraid I'd be alone too much. I assured her I'd find my way.

When I arrived at the airport, no daughter was there. One and a half hours later, still no Julie but I didn't panic. I had faith in her. Finally she showed up; she had an unexpected test that morning and there was a big accident on the 401.

She had two rules for me. 1. Always put the key hung by the door around my neck when I was going out and 2. don't speak to anyone. The next day, I went to the grocery store. She had given me directions, but when I came to the fork in the road, I didn't know if I should go right or left. There was a gray haired lady coming towards me, carrying two grocery bags. She didn't look threatening to me. I told her I was a long ways from home and needed some directions. She asked where I was from and when I said "Cape Breton", she told me her daughter works for Rita McNeil (Imagine that!). Rule #2 – ignored the first day.

My daughter had warned me of the culture shock. Suddenly I was a minority and hearing many foreign languages spoken all around me. When she took me to the beach, we couldn't swim in the water (another shock).

My first social encounter was through the priest at my church. He told me the Westminster United Church across the street had afternoon socials for Seniors. There I met two really Christian ladies; they really lived the Golden Rule. If there was a potluck, I was called; a speaker or any other events, I was informed. There was a bus trip to Prince Edward County and I was included. Julie said she couldn't wait to be a senior. They encouraged me to become a volunteer at the Sunshine Center on Center Island. I'd take two subways and a ferry two mornings a week. As I trudged along with my knapsack on my back, I'd think, "If my friends could see me now".

Julie is a connoisseur of food. She introduced me to Indian food, Thai, Japanese, and others and always knew what would be too hot or spicy for me. I'd walk to Chapter's on Sunday about forty minutes away, take one of the best sellers and sit and read and record the page number till the next time. Then we would go and dine.

I loved the yard sales, whole streets would participate, with food too. I was warned not to bring home big articles as we had a one-bedroom apartment, which had

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enough clutter. I found books, music, jewelry and movies didn't take up much room and brought enjoyment.

Some of the things I experienced were:

The tramcars – a good way to sight see.

The Subways – I could travel throughout the city.

The Ontario Museum – I could spend a week there.

The CN Tower – that didn't impress me as much as Dimitries, the ice cream place we visited afternoons.

**Renting bicycles and riding around on Toronto Island.** I was 57 years old. I didn't know I had the stamina.

I look back at the time spent at Chapters as one of peace and tranquility. Julie would have me attend matinees on really hot days.

**Once in a while, we'd have a visitor from Cape Breton.** I'd get so homesick after they'd leave. My son quoted Stephen King saying, "The trouble with most people is that they are trying to live their lives with one foot in the past and one in the present." That helped me put things into perspective.

After my daughter finished her course, she took me to the beautiful town of Elora. **It is called the "Highlands of Ontario". Many** movies are shot there. We had a wonderful weekend. When she received her first paycheck from her new job, she took me to the Red Lobster where I dined like a Queen and then it was time to come home – a bittersweet time.

Upon my return, there were several unforeseeable snags. My apartment was not available. My furniture was water-damaged and other problems cropped up. And after living in an apartment building with all its conveniences, sort of a cloistered life, I felt insecure and vulnerable for a long while. But I adapted again to the **"Cape Breton way of life". If I had known what trouble awaited me before hand,** would I have taken the trip? I hope so. My life has been so enriched and the time we spent together strengthened and bonded our relationship. We still laugh and reminisce about some of our shenanigans. Good memories are priceless.

## Valerie Bird

A long forgotten 19<sup>th</sup> century novelist and politician, Bulwer Lytton, wrote the following words in a play called Richelieu: *the pen is mightier than the sword*. The fact that few know about the man, but most of us are familiar with the quotation proves his point. The man is forgotten, the words live on.

Language is the most powerful tool in our armory, it is used for good and evil and everything in between.

Without it we could not communicate effectively. It is, therefore, often important to be precise in using the right words to relate to our fellow men. Writing my thoughts, I find, forces me to think. I don't know why, but it seems to me that we are a little more careful with the written word than the spoken one. So my reasons for being part of this writing circle are: a really enjoyable two hour session with my fellow members exchanging our written thoughts and exercising my mind to keep it alive in my old age.

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### POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Doubtless the phrase political correctness was introduced with the best intentions in order to reduce and eventually to eliminate verbal slights, offensive innuendo and downright insult to a variety of people, including other races, other religions, people with disabilities and last, but not least women. A rule to avoid disapproval by society. Like teaching your dog not to pee on the carpet. But it does not get to the core of the problem. It is sterile. It does not teach courtesy, tolerance, the recognition that difference does not imply inferiority. It does not suggest kindness or fellow feeling. It's lip service and sterile.

And because it involves a rule rather than fellow feeling it often becomes quite inappropriate.

Take Christmas. Western countries, predominantly Christian of several denominations, have celebrated the birth of the Christ Child for centuries. Celebrations were mainly sacred, involving Church, carols, even fasting on Christmas Eve and eating a festive meal after midnight mass. Mangers in churches, schools and sundry displays were taken as a matter of course, children in schools performed the Christmas story, and carolers went from house to house to sing the ancient carols. Modest gifts appeared under the Christmas tree, a relative innovation brought to England by Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria.

And then two things happened. Business decided that this was an ideal opportunity to persuade people to shop until they dropped. The other was post 2nd World War massive immigration to the West from non Christian countries. A perfect opportunity for the politically correct persuasion to show how inclusive we in the Western countries are, how fair, how civilized. We shall have Winter trees, Festivals of Lights, snowmen, winter songs, no mangers, the Christmas story in school plays will be replaced by Snow White and the seven dwarves. Thus we shall satisfy people who may feel excluded.

A survey in the United Kingdom showed that Muslims and Jews did not in the least feel excluded by Christmas celebrations and were happy to celebrate their own traditions in lands where their rights to do so were respected. They did not expect the host nations to abandon ancient traditions and were content to be able to celebrate their own traditions without fear. And so the well meaning political correctness militants, whose imagination and sometimes intelligence is often limited, achieved only the elimination of dearly loved traditions by millions of our society. Go figure.

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### MANDY

She was a smooth haired fox terrier and her pedigree was much, much better than mine, for that matter it was better than that of any member of my family. The name on her registration (birth certificate for aristocratic dogs) was **Trollhatan's Autumn Amanda**. We called her Mandy, among other names, mostly affectionate. When we first met her she was only three weeks old and together with her three brothers **she fitted into the two palms of her breeder's hands.** She was alert, and busy licking her siblings, and we chose her from the litter. She became a much loved and spoiled member of our family for the next almost 15 years. We waited impatiently till she was 7 weeks old and weaned, and then picked her up in Bible Hill from Trollhatan Kennels.

We always knew that when we finally got a dog we would get a Fox Terrier. Our reason for getting Mandy at this particular time was practical. Our son Rod was starting university and our daughter Glynis was 14 years old; we did not feel comfortable leaving her alone in the house when Alan and I went out for the evening, and of course, she was too old for a baby sitter. All of us liked dogs, they make great companions, so this was a good solution.

And so Mandy came to share our lives. Very shortly after she came to live with us a crisis arose: the Canadian Opera Company came to Sydney presenting Brigadoon and Alan, Glynis and I wanted to go. Mandy was too young to be left alone in the house, but unlike Glynis she was not too old to have a sitter. Our paper boy across the road, who was always happy to earn a few pennies, just fitted the bill. He became her regular sitter while she was still a puppy. I did mention that she was spoiled.

Fox terriers are a lot of fun. They are very bright but not very obedient, unless it suits them. It **is** possible to teach them to obey every command, but the result is a **loss of that personality which makes 'foxies' so much fun. We did make one** attempt - Glynis took her to Obedience School. She flunked. Mandy that is -- not Glynis. When all the Retrievers, Labs, Poodles and sundry other breeds walked in a circle and stopped or walked on command, Mandy decided that her aristocratic background entitled her to be different from this common rubble and sit down. She did not graduate and we spent no further money on her education. That suited her **just fine, a PHD from the kennel club was not on her list of life's achievements.**

**One of Mandy's preferred games was stealing. Her favourite two objects were Alan's shaving brush and pipe. She did not steal these things because she wanted them.** No, when she appropriated an object she came to show you that she had it, then ran and hid under a bed grinning, as if to say: catch me if you can. You could bribe her to come out and give up her loot, if you suggested a game of ball. Playing catch was something Mandy could not resist and she was very, very good at it. Her other favourite pastime was swimming. When driving in the car to a beach, she could smell a lake, the sea or river some few minutes before we actually got to the water. She began moaning softly and got very restless in the back seat of the car.

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And when we reached our destination and opened the car door she shot out of the car as if a devil were chasing her, heading straight for the water.

**As a rule Mandy participated in whatever we were doing. So on one New Year's Eve,** when we had a party, she was not excluded. Not that she intruded in any way, and in any case, all our friends knew her. There were about 30 of us and some of our guests were sitting on the elevated hearth, some on the window seat. We were serving a brandy spiked egg -nog, and people were filling their cups from the punch bowl in the dining room. I noticed that some of our guests --not especially noted for overindulgent imbibing - got up more often than others for refills, some times with a rather puzzled look on their face. I wondered whether Alan had been a bit heavy-handed with the Brandy, and thought that I had better bring the food on ---- when Mandy staggered across the room. She looked drunk and she was. It appears that our friends who sat on the hearth or window seat put their punch cups on the floor next to them, not noticing that this opportunistic canine, who could make herself very unobtrusive when it suited her, quietly slurped the contents. Mandy had a hangover next day.

When Alan went on business trips I particularly appreciated her companionship. She always knew when he was coming back and hours before his arrival she sat on the hall stairs waiting for him. I am not a fanciful person and was truly puzzled by this phenomenon. A vet friend explained, that while dogs have no telepathy, they are **keen observers of people's behaviour. And my behaviour evidently was different** when Alan was returning from a trip. Little things like setting the table in the dining room rather than in the kitchen where I ate when I was alone, my upbeat mood, getting the car ready to go to the airport, and doubtless a number of things I was not even aware of signaled that Alan was returning.

Mandy had a friend. Her name was Cleopatra, Cleo for short. She was a Siamese cat. Mandy used to stay with her (and the person she owned) when Alan and I went **abroad and couldn't take her. When she arrived at Cleo's house the reunion was effusive. Noses were touched, Cleo purred and Mandy's short tail wagged furiously.** In the last year of her life Mandy lost her eyesight. It was touching and remarkable to see Cleo navigating Mandy around the furniture, making sure that her friend did not bump into anything. And no I am not making this up.

When Mandy died we were very sad and missed her. She will always be a very happy memory.

## FEAR

**"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."** Thus Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his inaugural address March 4th 1933.

There are, of course, several levels of fear and I believe that President Roosevelt was talking about one particular level of emotion.

## Among Our Souvenirs

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There is a world of difference between the apprehension, tension and nervousness we feel before an exam or interview or an appearance before an audience in some capacity or other, and the cold fear that grips you when someone close to you, or you yourself are in danger. And than there is the fear imposed on populations, by people in charge, in order to keep control of the masses.

When Alan and I were bringing our first child, Rod, home from the hospital we were both apprehensive. We were in our mid-twenties and neither of us felt that we were really grown-up and capable of looking after a small person who depended on us for everything. But we could work on it and advice was available. Fear, or apprehension before some event when we need to prove ourselves can be minimized through our own efforts. Studying before exams, preparing for an interview, learning our lines when performing in a play, build confidence and diminish fear. In these cases our lives have been enriched by new knowledge and the experience of taking charge.

But when 15 years after Rod was born he was taken to hospital and diagnosed with meningitis, we were not apprehensive, we were petrified. There was absolutely nothing that we could do except wait. Two days of waiting can seem longer than two years.

**Thanks to Dr. Watson Sodero's quick action of injecting a hefty dose of antibiotic into Rod's spine, we did get the good news that Rod would recover but the few days while we waited for the verdict were sheer agony.**

Years later, when Rod's son, our grandson Adam, was almost two years old he too gave us a scare. He started falling over frequently and his speech which had been very good was deteriorating. His parents took him to Halifax for a CAT scan -- this was before we had this facility in Sydney --- **and Rod's suspicions were confirmed** -- Adam had a tumor on the brainstem. I very clearly remember the day of Adam's surgery, we were looking after his 7 year old sister, and it took all my self control to stay calm, and prevent transferring my fears to her. We waited all day for the telephone call from Halifax. When it finally came, and we learned that the surgery was successful and the removed tumor had proven to be benign the relief was almost physical.

If fear grips you in the middle of your stomach, paralyses your mind, relief has the opposite effect. You want to tell the whole world your good news (though the world **really doesn't care**) and sing and shout and if you are young enough jump in the air.

The final kind of fear I want to mention is one that is very topical these days. Since the twin towers tragic event in the United States additional security measures have been introduced. That is rational. But governments have been known to exploit public fear in order to pass restrictive laws and measures in the name of security. Withdrawals of liberties, **intrusion on people's privacy, routine state surveillance**, creation of distrust among neighbours in the name of security, all these are tools to gain control. Quoting from Aldous Huxley's book Ends And Means he says: ***The end***

## Among Our Souvenirs

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*cannot justify the means for the simple reason that the means employed determine the end produced.* And George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four, published in 1949 as a warning, and may yet prove to be a prophecy.

### THE CATALYST

The turning point of my life was the occupation of my native Czechoslovakia by **Hitler's Army and the subsequent start of World War Two.** In May 1939 destiny decreed that the course of my future would unfold in a way that could not have been predicted by the most skillful fortuneteller.

Growing up in a middle class family in my home town Bratislava, I did not give much thought to what I will be, nor where I would live when I grew up.

Subconsciously I probably believed that I would finish my education, possibly get a job or get married, maybe both, lead the kind of conventional life that women like my mother and most women I knew lead. Like they, I might occasionally travel to nearby Austria or venture a bit further to Italy or France, but my native land would be the place I would call home. There was no question that the language I would mostly use would be Slovak or Czech.

I was 16 when the German Wehrmacht occupied my country in 1939. Two years later I matriculated from secondary school (matriculation is the set of exams a student has to pass in order to be admitted to a university). Students were a defiant and restless lot, deeply resenting the occupation of our lovely and prosperous little country which had been founded on a principle of Democracy. Dissent and defiance are part of students' psyche everywhere, even when they have to find a cause. Our discontent though was real, and very deep and we did not accept our elders' philosophy of practicing passive resistance. We were not stupid enough to demonstrate: students at the university of Prague had done that in 1939, and were shot dead for their troubles. It was clear to us that our only course was to get out of the country, and try to get to a place where we could join the war effort against the Axis of Germany and Italy.

There were six of us ---two girls and four boys --- we had been in school together for twelve years. The plan was to cross the border to Hungary, which had not yet been occupied at the time, and see what we could do from there. We all had passports, Hungary was just a train ride away (our city was close to the border) moreover everyone of us spoke fluent, idiomatic German a useful thing should we be questioned about the purpose of our trip to Budapest.

We were young, determined, convinced of being invincible, and the trip to Budapest went without a hitch. As far as anyone who may have asked was concerned, we were a group of young people on a trip, celebrating the successful completion of their recent exams.

## Among Our Souvenirs

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We had money, our parents had seen to that, and we had contacts in Budapest, Hungary and in Istanbul, Turkey. That part of Europe was not a war zone at that time, and so we had no trouble traveling on the Orient Express--**that's a train**--from Hungary through Rumania and Bulgaria to Turkey via the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. On arrival in Istanbul we were met and looked after by a member of an organization that acted for the Czechoslovak Government in exile. The headquarters were in London, and there were consulates in exile, in many parts of the free world. We were looked after and eventually directed to recruitment centers where all of us joined some branch of the British armed forces.

**I joined the WAAF, the women's branch of the Royal Air Force. I spoke Czech, German and acceptable French but my English was minimal. Believe me, there is nothing like being completely immersed in a group that speaks a different language for learning it fast. It did not take me very long to be reasonably accomplished in basic English, and I passed my initial training followed by training in meteorology well enough.**

I shall not bore you with details of my 4 years service career. But because it is relevant to my story I must mention, that in 1944 I was posted to what was at that time RAF Lydda (and is now Ben Gurion Airport, the main airport in Israel) where I met Alan, the man I married . By this time my English was pretty fluent and Alan improved it further. Occasionally his wicked sense of humour found it irresistible to improve my idiomatic knowledge, like telling me that the correct expression for **asking your guests to sit down is to tell them: "please park your arse".**

And so my life after 1945 became very different from the life I might have imagined a few years ago: I had changed my everyday language, I lived in a different country, I became a citizen of the United Kingdom, my children were born in England, and in 1958 we came to live in Canada and became Canadian citizens and we moved to Cape Breton. And now here I am in this very pleasant writing circle  
---- **and it all was triggered by Hitler's Army.**

In the scheme of events all this is insignificant. In wars millions of lives are changed and millions are lost. History records dates, numbers, important names of heroes and villains.

The little histories of individuals mostly die with them.

Camilla MacGibbon

*Tuesday, April 22 2008*

*I just dropped off my cat Níkkithe Vet's & had some time to kill. I thought about an ad I saw in the Cape Breton Postwriting circle, so off I go. As a very young child I loved to read but living in a rural village, we didn't have a library and had to wait for the beloved bookmobile. Watching and waiting for it was like waiting for Santa to me. I loved school projects that required writing stories. I did mine quickly and usually helped my friends. So the story goes: you get married, have kids, work, then retire. I now have time to do some things I always wanted to do. I arrived at the Southend Community Center, found the classroom, walked in and received a warm greeting. I immediately felt at home. I have found a great group of people like me, who love to read and write. I am not great at but love to do it and with help I'll get better. Hope to see you in the fall.*