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## ADULT CHILDREN

*Being One, Having One & What Goes In-Between*



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TO THOSE WHO RAISED US—  
AND THOSE WE RAISED—  
AND ALL THE GROWTH INVOLVED  
FOR ALL, FOR ALL . . .



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## HEATHER TOSTESON

### *ADULT CHILDREN:*

*Being One, Having One & What Goes In-Between*

#### *Where It All Began*

Often the ideas for our anthologies take years to gestate, either because we're not ready to share them or others aren't as interested as we in exploring the topic. If I look through my files, I realize that this anthology has been turning around in my head—and life—for a very long time. In the fall of 2013 I wrote a possible anthology call that began: "Adult To Adult: *Is it possible with those we raised or those who raised us?* . . . When asked, most parents will say their most important task is nurturing their children to adulthood. But when both are adult, is the relationship between them ever adult to adult?"

I wrote that call at a point in my life when my son was going through a difficult separation from his wife. My husband and I were in Mexico at the time, busily editing the anthology *Connected: What Remains as We All Change*. My son was in New York and not answering calls. My anxiety was acute—and had no realistic place to go. What could I, at sixty-two, really do to ease the challenges he faced at forty? I was living again, however briefly, in Mexico, the country where my own choices had posed challenges for him, in his adolescence, that he had experienced as unbearable—creating a lasting rage at me which he also sometimes found unbearable. He told me this in his own early thirties as we sat in a delicatessen in Boston, gathering there for my father's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. I took it both as a gesture of confidence—he was speaking his truth—and also a source of anguish, since we can't rewrite the past, only refuse to repeat it.

However, in Mexico, those many years later, at very different stages in both our lives, my son now several years older than I had been when I brought him there, I was assailed with memories of his early childhood, of the fierce protectiveness I felt for him as a young single mother—and with something more solid than guilt for the formidable challenges he had faced in his early teens when I uprooted both of us for "pinche, putamadre love"

as I wrote in a poem. I could, at last, bear to *feel* what that experience might have been like for him. But it had taken me a good eight years and a return to those locations, although in very different—and better—circumstances, to be able to bear that knowledge and that guilt.

I also understood that my current angst was stripping my son of all the years of his own intentional maturation, all the many many adult choices he had made that had nothing to do with me or those choices I made in his adolescence. I titled that series of poems, "Letters to my Son, Twenty Years a Man." I've never shared them with him, nor do I think he would have any interest in reading them. He has his story and I have mine. I'm sure you would hear powerful, abiding affection in each of our stories, but the stories don't neatly mesh. Nor should they.

He made this clear to me by his resolute silence when, recently, in celebration of his forty-ninth birthday we were walking a South Carolina beach and I was sharing with him some of the stories included in this anthology—and the questions and insights that were arising from reading them. *Whatever*. He turned the conversation to issues of his own concern: challenges and intrigues at his workplace, savings accounts, housing markets.

I gazed out at the ocean, a little miffed. Couldn't he see he might be one of the underlying inspirations for the all this? ("Far too clearly," my husband would say later with a hearty laugh, "and he's wisely not taking the bait.") As we walked on, I saw a wonderful set of triplets, fair-haired boys of about four, gathering at the water's edge—their young parents and a little two-year-old sister gamely tagging behind. I imagined what those boys would remember of their childhood, what kind of mind meld they might develop as an identical trio. How their little sister would position herself over the years.

Over the next two days, we would pass that young family several times as we rode our bicycles along the sand. Each time the boys spoke to my imagination—as did their father, gently cajoling and firmly corralling them. Finally, just before we left, impulsively I stopped and asked if I could take a photo of them. I probably was thinking of just photographing the triplets, but the parents understood it as a group portrait and eagerly agreed. The mother, a beautiful, sylph-thin redhead in a bikini, joined us, pulling in the most recalcitrant of the boys. I told the parents how impressed I was each time I passed at what a wonderful job they were doing at what could only be a challenging task. Both parents beamed. "Thank you so much. We know it will get easier in the future," the mother said, reaching out to catch her

daughter's hand as the father hurried off toward the water in pursuit of the boys.

I looked at her beautiful smile and her flat, tanned belly and I wondered, as I'm sure she often did, *How did all this amazing life come out of one small being?*



Revisiting this topic of adult children in our current anthology call, my questions are obviously much what they were before. *Can* we ever be in a fully adult relationship with those who raised us, or they with us? What does that adult-adult relationship look like? These questions are especially salient now that our life spans are increasing and we spend decades longer together as adults. Many of the markers of adulthood—child-bearing age and economic self-sufficiency are also being extended, so the natural equalizers and transitions between generations are not coming into play as early or as clearly. We also often live at a distance from our families of origin, so our interactions are fewer and more symbolically charged.

All adults are, by definition, adult children. But adult child is a squinting construction, the emphasis often shifting in ways that reflect the tension in the condition, an ambiguity reflected in some of the dominant stories we tell about familial relations. On that same beach trip, I observed to my son that he, as have all our children, had lived a number of years longer as an independent adult than he had lived with me. He in turn observed with a smile that I had now lived with my husband longer than I had with him. Unspoken was the question of whether this reality had made it into our inner narrative—or shared—narratives.



### *Grievance Stories*

Several narratives are dominant if you scan the books that come up under the search term "adult children". The first is "adult children of—" stories, which focus on parental inadequacies and our vulnerability to them. We all have them of course, but this type of story/grouping holds out a suggestion that we all have a "right" to an untroubled childhood with adequate parents. Another theme is estrangement—parents who feel rejected by their adult children. A third is the sandwiched adult—usually female—responsible for caring for both aging parents and children who are "emerging

## PAMELA HARTMANN

### *DON'T REMEMBER THIS*

Caroline flung herself into active waiting mode. After twenty-five years of writing textbooks in English as a Foreign Language, she had received notice that the only publishing house for which she had ever worked was closing its EFL Department and expanding STEM. She didn't know anything about STEM. Stunned, she did nothing for days before summoning the energy to send out updated resumes.

Six months later, still jobless, her daily routine had morphed into ritual. She got up at 7:00 and assembled breakfast: coffee and two eggs, boiled, not fried, and a bowl of blueberries—for memory, they said. It was imperative not to check texts or email until 9:00, not to check the mailbox until 1:00. When the phone rang, she had to let it ring three times for fear of appearing too eager.

She had spent these months cleaning out closets, washing windows, catching up on email, working in the garden, going to the gym, taking classes. And she waited, uneasy with her suspicion that ritual was the refuge of the desperate.

Afternoon. Late summer. As she did every day, she called her mother.

"How are you, Mom?"

"Same old, same old."

"Are they treating you well? You're feeling okay?"

"Oh, ready to run a race."

"Yeah. I know."

"So are you enjoying your vacation?" her mother asked every afternoon.

"It's not a vacation."

"I know that. So what are you doing these days?"

"Well, I had my Modern Greek class last night, you know."

"You did? You didn't tell me about that. Why are you doing that?"

Caroline sighed. "I lived there one year, remember? In Greece?"

"You did?"

It was a long time ago—almost thirty years now. Her father had grumbled about how impractical it was, to be majoring in Classics.

"Oh? But why do you want to learn—what's that language again?" her mother said.

"Greek." Caroline thought a moment. The truth behind her impulse to sign up for the class was hard to articulate. She settled for a lesser truth. "I guess because it feels like progress to be learning something."

"Are you happy?" her mother asked, as she did each day.

"I'm fine."

"But are you happy?"

"I can't say *happy*. That's putting it too strongly, but I'm doing fine. I'm trying to take advantage of this time."

"Wouldn't you be happier if you were busy?"

"I'm keeping busy."

"Oh, Honey, I'm so sorry you're not happy."

"I'm doing okay. Are *you* okay?"

"Ready to run a race."



For a short time during Caroline's childhood, her parents were swept up in the wave of enthusiasm for *The Power of Positive Thinking*. A collection of self-affirming slogans was taped to the refrigerator, each copied in her mother's meticulous hand. Now, decades later, one of these slogans would invade her thoughts at odd moments—a chirpy, unwelcome mantra. *Every day in every way I am getting better and better!* It stuck in her mind like a burr.



In the morning, Caroline turned her attention to the garden, as she did every morning. Her plan six months earlier, in spring, had been to plant a Mediterranean herb garden, terraced on the hillside. She thought of it as a Greco-Roman hanging garden of Babylon. But first she had to prepare the space. The yard was huge, an overgrown tangle neglected in recent years when work had consumed her time. Now she had nothing but time. She pruned Coastal Oak and Monterey Pine, thinned California Lilac, tore out coyote bush, and endlessly weeded. In spring, the ground had been soft from the winter rains, the weeds easy to pull. The repetition of motions was restful,

## ALISA CHILDRESS

### *PLEADING FOR ANSWERS*

The room had unbelievably shiny floors. Almost reflective. My mom sat next to me. This woman, who was once taxed with raising me, with my health and safety. She took me to doctor appointments, to the dentist, to church. She looked after my physical and spiritual well-being. Today, we were sitting together in this room, waiting for a doctor. She was waiting for her doctor, Dr. A.

Despite driving for thirty minutes and getting on multiple expressways, she had not realized that we were not at her doctor's office, which is only blocks from her home. And in a much different and much older building, one without the impossibly shiny floors. We were in the cancer unit, which on Thursdays is on loan to the memory care team. As I sat, I wondered if I was sitting in the same room my dad was in when he first received his terminal diagnosis.

While she was waiting for her primary care doctor, I was waiting for a neuropsychologist. For someone who could give me answers as to why my mother did not seem to realize why she was not in her usual doctor's office. Why she did not know who I was at times, or her husband, or her best friend of over fifty years. Or her grandchildren, including my mostly grown son.

Now, I am tasked with taking her to the doctor and seeing to her mental and physical well-being. We waited for several minutes until a lovely, young nurse entered. During this short wait, my mother commented on the floors dozens of times. She told me several times that she liked them. Each time it was as though it was her first time seeing them, and she had not commented on them less than a minute before.

"Look at these floors."

"Yeah. The floors are super shiny. Think someone waxed them last night?"

"Why are we here. Are you sick?"

"No. You are at the doctor's."

"Oh. Where is Dr. A? Why is it taking so long? Should we leave? Did you see these floors?!"

"I know. They are shiny. Would you like a magazine?" I pull out the *Better Homes and Gardens* from the basket by my chair. She has always liked the pictures. She was always interested in home decorating and kept a beautiful house. At least, in the before times.

"No. Thanks. Why are we here? Are you sick?"

"No. We are at your doctor."

"I feel fine. Wow. Look at these floors."

She is beyond the point of being able to tell me what she likes about these floors. Whether it is the brown color, the fake streak of marble, or the shininess that makes it difficult to notice the color or see the fake marble streak. I assume that it is the shininess and say that I imagine that someone just recently polished them. I mention the doors, which are primarily tempered glass set into a distressed wooden frame. I like the doors. I hope this will take the conversation away from the floor as I do not think I can bear to hear about them again.

I take out my phone and show her pictures of the family. "Who is that?" I am showing her my son's senior picture.

"That is Josh."

"I don't think I know him."

"He is your grandson. My baby."

"Oh. I don't know anything about that. Just look at those floors."

The sweet, young, blond nurse comes into the room, introducing herself as April. I pull my mother's Covid-required mask back up over her nose. April is pleasant and smiles through her mask as she talks. She asks my mother her name.

"Beverly."

My mom stares blankly when Nurse April asks for her last name. We waited a few moments. I was confident that she was going to say "Netherton." She identifies with this name now. It was her maiden name, two marriages ago.

The first marriage, to my father, lasted seven years. Then there was a long period of being single, in which she seriously contemplated becoming a nun. She then met and dated my step-father for many years. They have been married for twenty-six years and counting. She has not been a Netherton

**JOAN DOBBIE***CONVERSATION BEFORE SLEEP**For my Mom 1913-2002*

She knew I'd be writing about it  
after she died.

*Are you taking notes?*  
(Her voice almost demanding.)

No, I said.  
Did you take your evening pills?

*No*, she said. *Do I have to?*

Yes

*I think you should write a novel about my life.*  
*I've had a very interesting life.*

I've already written about your life.  
Besides, I'm a poet not a novelist.

*Novels sell better.*  
*You need to write a novel.*

Alright. I'll think about it, okay?  
You need to take your night pills.

*Do I have to take the yuck medicine?*

Yes

*Alright, if you say so. But it makes me sick.*

You'll be sicker if you don't take it.  
Anyhow, Barb says you need to take it.

*Alright, if Barb says so then I have to take it.*  
*Are you sure I have to take it?*

Yes. No.—Okay. I'll ask Barb tomorrow.  
Maybe you can stop taking it.

*Good. But do I still have to take it tonight?*

Yes

*Okay, if you say so. I do everything I'm told.*  
*Will you get me a cigarette?*

No. Yes. Okay, here.  
But you have to sit up to smoke it.

*You should start on that novel, you know, while*  
*you still have me around to answer questions.*

Maybe tomorrow. I have to  
think about it, okay?

*Okay, tomorrow. By the way,*  
*are you taking notes?*

**MICHELE MARKARIAN**

*MY MOTHER'S MOTHER*



"This is my sister," says my mother, beaming and patting my arm. "No. No—wait. This is my *mother*."

"I'm your daughter, Ma," I reply, somewhat testily. It is my mother's birthday, and I have bought enough of her favorite Chinese food to share with the table at her nursing home, which I do.

Arlene, a woman who is just a few years younger than my mother and whose own mother is 103, looks at me shrewdly. Arlene visits her mother almost every day, even though her mother can be sharp and dismissive. This Arlene chalks up to old age.

I would like to chalk my mother's behavior up to old age, but really, she is who she always was, only a little more concentrated.

"Stay with me tonight," my mother demands. "I can't be alone. My fiancé isn't speaking to me." This is new, my mother's boy-crazy side. Every week there's a new fiancé, with some kind of roadblock to marital happiness—another girlfriend, a possessive mother, a demanding job.

"I can't, Ma."

"Why not?" My mother's mouth sets itself in a hard line.

"I have tickets to the theater—"

"Always the theater with you!" Her eyes narrow to slits.

"More eggplant?" I hold out the dish to Arlene's mom, who ignores me.

"So selfish!" My mother is enraged, looking at me in the way she always did. It doesn't matter that I am the only one of her three children who is here to celebrate her birthday. I am also her health care proxy, power of attorney, executor. I handle her finances. Yet I am about to let her push my buttons, the ones that she has created.

"Besides, Ma, there's no bed for me here." This is undeniably true. Nursing homes do not allow sleepovers.

"Selfish, selfish, selfish. Always do whatever you want. Always have,

SERA DAVID

UNDERCURRENT

*She better not wave.* Just the thought of that possibility made my cheeks feel hot.

Walking into the cafeteria as a college freshman was hard enough—flashbacks of my high school lunchroom reminded me of the awkwardness of looking for someone to sit with—but when I saw her, I felt even more like an embarrassed kid. There, holding court in the cafeteria of the college that was supposed to represent my independence, my freedom, and my adulthood, was my mother.

Known as the Parents-On-Campus program, mothers and fathers of full-time undergraduate students were eligible to take regular undergraduate courses tuition-free on a space-available basis. Parents could audit courses or take them for credit; they could pursue an interest or seek a degree. A great benefit for my mom as she always wanted to go to college—that dream was put on hold when my siblings and I were born in quick succession.

Not so great a benefit for me, because really, who wants to go to college with her mom?

When we learned about the free courses for parents, my mom was ecstatic; I never saw her so excited before. About anything. It made my decision harder.

I was choosing between this college and a larger state university. Both were within driving distance from our house. I felt more at home on the smaller campus, but was reconsidering after envisioning my mom on the college grounds. But then the guilt hit. My parents were helping to pay tuition. And I could help my mom realize her dream. After all she did for me, this was something I could do for her. Her face beamed when I submitted my acceptance. It made me feel good. Until the first day of school approached.

We did lay some ground rules, like we wouldn't carpool and we wouldn't register to take the same class at the same time. Thankfully, we had different



**CATHERINE HAYES***A FEAR OF MOTHERHOOD*

*Are you pregnant or nursing?*

I can always feel my heart rate go up whenever I hear someone ask me this question, not because it's true but because I'm scared of the fate that has already been assumed for me simply because I am a woman. It seems like this question always comes up at every single medical appointment I go to no matter what branch of medicine it is—primary care, therapy, even when I went to get a root canal I was asked this question. I always feel a sense of relief when I answer no and sometimes it's so palpable that I even make that exaggerated face that says "oh hell no"—the widened eyes, the head shake, and the enunciation of the negative word.

Ever since I was a little girl, my parents always told me that I have choices in life. They always told me to go on and have a career before settling down to have a family, that my life as a woman was not just defined by the idea of one day getting married and having children. Society says otherwise since I've been asked questions like this ever since I turned sixteen. At only twenty-one, I know that there is no pressure to become a mother and that I have the freedom to go have a career right now, but what about in the future? If I feel such relief at being able to say no, what will I feel like if I one day have to say yes?

The role of caregiver is not a foreign one, and in a way, I already am a mother. I have been for many years now and no matter how old I grow or how old any potential children I might one day have if I do change my mind will be, there will always be one person who is dependent on me for the rest of her life: my autistic sister Caroline.

She is low enough on the spectrum that she is unable to live alone and properly take care of herself. I have to help her with almost every aspect of her life; making sure she has proper dress for the different seasons, that she is in good health and hygiene, that she is living her best life with the vocational



**LISA MOLINA***WHEN WE HELD HANDS*

"You have your father's hands,"  
I said when the nurse placed your  
tiny waxy wet body into my arms.  
Fingers thin and long.

Three years later, I held one of your hands  
as you wailed at the shock of pain,  
when a nurse pricked one of those fingers.  
The blood soon revealing your body was full of leukemia cells.

I held your hands throughout the thirty-eight months of  
chemotherapy, clumps of your hair falling into my hands as I  
would wash it, until none was left.

I felt those tiny hands as fists banging on my chest because you  
were so furious that this medicine that was going to make you  
well made you feel so sick.

I felt those hands squeezing mine across the table  
eight years later when the cancer returned.

"Mom, I don't want to die. Tell me I'm not going to die. Please! Tell me I  
won't die."

I sat caressing your hands while four nurses and a doctor worked  
furiously to revive you while you lay unconscious in septic  
shock, nearly dying, remembering the day I first saw and held  
them through a blur of tears.

And I held those skeleton-like hands two years later  
when the cancer was now in your brain.  
And the umbilical cord blood of an unknown savior child  
was transplanted into your withering, nearly-dead body,  
resurrecting you.

•

You're twenty-four now,  
free of the grip of cancer.

We haven't held hands in many years.  
But I look at them often, hoping you don't notice.  
And I smile softly as I watch those beautiful, long-fingered  
hands you inherited from your father, pulsate with  
movement and life.

And I can still feel them holding mine.



## J. WEST

### *INTERIORS: TABLE, AS IS, WITH BLUE DOG*

The Goodwill table needs a home. A mother and daughter muscle its weight up two flights of stairs, then pause in the hall, panting. The old oak surface bears multiple scars. Five stout legs look ready to send roots through the floor. As if in protest, a joist creaks. Today marks Sheila's third visit to her daughter's vintage apartment.

"Half a sec," Zoe says, jangling keys.

It's August, which ramps up the building's layered aroma: mildew, ammonia, forgotten mops, fast food cartons, discarded hopes.

With a flourish, Zoe opens the door, points to the east wall. "There, okay?"

Sheila stares at laundry draped over moving boxes. Scattered across the green shag carpet, tools mingle with knickknacks, dog toys, and unopened mail. No seating arrangement or focal point. No aisle to the window, where the fitful AC unit churns. "Shouldn't we clear—"

Zoe raps on the table. "Mom. *Mom*. I don't want you to move anything."

Sheila could not have heard that correctly. Kneeling to mask her maternal dismay, she re-ties a sneaker. The state of her bones these days makes her dread falling. "Just shoring up support for these unreliable feet," she says, simultaneously buying time for the tension to ease. "My P.T. keeps warning me to watch where I'm going."

"I mean it, Mom. Don't move *anything*."

Sheila straightens, then steps into the room. Goodness, she thinks. Common sense alone justifies nudging aside that chair, at least a few inches.

"*Mom!*"

"I'll put everything back. I promise."

Even facing away from her daughter, she senses emotional static, like a downed power line after a storm. One hand drifts to her chest and settles there: An unnamed pressure throbs. Oh, she itches to shove that backpack

**PAUL SOHAR***MY CRUTCH*

a curtain of words  
 a page torn from a dictionary  
 that's what I throw on the hospital bed

what is the opposite of orphan

widows and widowers go hand in hand  
 but a parent robbed of an only child has no label  
 no rubric no box to cross off on any form  
 not even on the death certificate

what is the opposite of gray  
 black or white

what is the opposite of melancholy  
 despair or serenity

what is the opposite of a wreath  
 a desert or a rose garden

the roof garden of the Met Museum  
 or the desert around Jericho  
 I'd take either if she too can come

what is the opposite of remembrance  
 pain or joy

the opposite of orphan is a lonely old  
 geezer sneaking into an empty cemetery  
 with a memory to lean on

what's going to break first  
 the question or the crutch

**GAYLE BELL***REFLECTIONS*

Rush to get to my momma  
 Emergency room  
 I see an old-school brother  
 greet with horizon wide grins  
 hugs grateful of a minor distraction  
 a warm soul

I go see momma  
 Plumped kewpie smile  
 history is complicated  
 I pull her up in bed  
*how can flies be in a hospital?*  
*"Momma, you must have oil on your ass*  
*you keep slipping down the bed"*

coax information out of jagged nurses  
 admonishing mom's desire  
 for a sneak out cig  
*that's why you're in this bed momma*

I trundle momma home in a cab  
 I walk dazed toward the bus  
 see my renewed acquaintance  
 touch his shoulder and confess  
 "me and momma were so at odds  
 when I was younger,  
 who knew I'd be the dutiful daughter."

*DOWN HOME BLUES*

My mom sells her homemade liquor a mixture of potatoes sugars,  
 some citrus fruits  
 bottled in bell jars set under the house  
 "now don't smoke under there," she warns my stepfather

Down Home Blues is playing  
 in the afterhours joint  
 Shaky pool table, scratchy juke box  
 Mom, the part-time proprietress  
 with my 18-month-old baby  
 dressed in a diaper, T-shirt, and pink bows

Papa packs food, diaper bag, blankets, and baby toys for next door  
 excursion  
 I fuss over my child with my uniform on *Now that baby will be just*  
*fine* Mom says

Mom shoos a couple of brothers away from the door *Take that weed mess away*  
*my grand baby is here*

My baby is dancing on the pool table  
 Momma smiles while holding her hand urging her customers to put  
 some money in the jar talking about baby's new shoes

*TIME'S ARROW*

Monarchs flit among the milkweeds.  
 "The butterfly cycle's an example,"  
 says my son, "of time's arrow.  
 It only works in one direction."  
 I point to my white hair and laugh.  
 Already we see chrysalides,  
 expectant as painted buntings.

Lacking physics, unlike him, I argue  
 for a time machine that goes backward,  
 to an era before Corona interspersed  
 masks and distance when we meet.

When we aren't relaxing on Matt's pergola,  
 Surrounded by morning glory vines,  
 watching the dog worry  
 the edge of the yard for squirrels—  
 when it's winter, what will we do?

"I've been listening," I say, "to your father.  
 Despite his death and time's arrow,  
 he's proud of the way you built this deck."  
 "I've taken Dad inside me," Matt says.

**LORI CLOSTER***SURVIVING FAMILY*

"You'll notice a big change this time," my mother warned as she glanced into the rear-view mirror and changed lanes. She was maneuvering her silver Caddie through southbound traffic to Miami Beach, where my grandmother had been ensconced like a queen for half a century. Slouched beside her on the gray leather passenger seat, I felt pleasantly irresponsible without my children, in my father's care at my parents' canal-side home in Boca Raton. Tony and Angela, my mother had decreed, would be "too much" for Nana. I touched my sunburned cheek gingerly and loosened the seatbelt, which had tightened across the tender skin of my shoulder. My few hours of beach time since my arrival from ice-bound New Hampshire had been too much; I always forgot how easy it was to get scorched down here. Familiar exits blurred past—Pompano Beach, Fort Lauderdale, Hollywood, the evocatively named Ives Dairy Road—and my mother's words echoed in my mind.

Nana was a law unto herself. She'd come from money, but had somehow lost it. Later she'd divorced my grandfather, a scandal in her generation. Careful with cash to the point of frugality as a divorcee, she had aspired to and achieved the fundamentals of an Old European lifestyle: almost-daily trips to the market for fresh artichokes, cucumbers, and other veggies, designer shoes, and an impressive amount of global travel. She never bought a paper napkin; it was ivory linen all the way, which always gave me a surge of pure pleasure when viewed against the claret velvet chairs of her Mediterranean dining room set. Somehow she'd held onto her rent-controlled apartment with a private patio, right through the gay gentrification that transformed her neighborhood into a Caribbean kaleidoscope and made the Beach a destination. Aside from the lovely, progressive silvering of my grandmother's hair and the slight tremor she'd developed in her wrist, a visit to Nana in her lair resembled an annual drop into a rabbit hole in which only I myself, Alice-like, had changed in forty years.

## DEBORAH SCHMEDEMANN

## TITLE NINE DAUGHTER

"Oh. Of course. You look just like Mary."

This most recent time, just a few weeks ago, the comment came from the mother of the family that recently moved into the Chicago three-flat owned by my daughter Mary and her husband. I was delighted to meet this family and had just introduced myself as Mary's mother.

"Thanks," I responded. I wanted to say that as a matter of historical record it is *Mary* who looks like *me*. That is how people used to comment on our strong resemblance, when Mary was a child, a teenager.

How long has it been since the comment flipped? At least a decade, since she became fully adult. I do see the truth in what people say now: she is the vibrant version; I am the fading imitation.



For Mary's birthday this summer, I gave her a gift certificate to Title Nine, a company founded and operated by women, which sells clothes and gear for athletic women. Its catalogue features photos of women surfing, rock climbing, mountain biking; the captions provide the women's first names, occupations, hobbies, and zingy self-statements. These models not only look strong and energetic; they appear at ease and jazzed.

Mary could be a Title Nine model: "road cyclist, non-profit fundraiser, landlord, mother, craves fresh air." I gave Mary the gift certificate so she could pick up something for an upcoming trip biking and camping from Chicago to northern Michigan.

I like looking at the catalogue, seeing my daughter in the pictures. What I don't see is myself, even in my younger years.



We started out and grew up so differently. I was born with a small hole in my heart, blood slushing where it should not go, my heart working a bit too hard. The doctors urged my parents to keep me from over-working, so I was kept away from serious athletics. My slightly misaligned left knee is unstable, so certain sports have always been off-limits. I have had migraine headaches since I was a child. I have broken bones and been stitched closed, from head to foot. So I have navigated life thinking of my body as a fallible and finicky vessel to be managed with care.

Mary is blessed with a healthy heart in a trim torso; long, lean, well-aligned limbs; and only occasional headaches. She inherited natural athleticism from her father: stamina, strength, coordination, grace, nerve. As she grew, she competed in gymnastics, soccer, distance running, cross-country skiing, crew, triathlons. She made it through childhood unscathed: nary a sprain, break, stitch. No wonder she sees her body as a trusted, dependable asset.

As well, we are women of our times. I was born in 1956, Mary in 1984. Title IX, the federal statute paving the way for funding of women's athletics, was enacted in 1972. The culture was ripe for raising an athletic woman during Mary's youth—not so during mine.

I do give myself credit for one facet of Mary's athleticism. In matters non-athletic, I have a fair measure of resilience, a positive legacy of the sudden death of my mother Anna Mary when I was sixteen. This resilience helped me weather Harvard Law School and served me well in my career as a law professor. I see a version of my resilience in Mary's quiet self-confidence.



When I look back on that day—September 7, 2018—I sometimes wonder: what was I thinking about all day? My husband Craig and I (mostly residents of Minneapolis) were in Chicago that fall for Baby Watch Round Two.

Round One was in July of 2015. Early that spring, Mary had alerted us that she and her husband Adam had chosen a home birth supported by a doula and mid-wife team. I told her that I felt "nervous" about this plan. She sent me her research, which I read; I then was aware that she was a fine candidate for a home birth—and still nervous. I could not forget that I had delivered Mary and her sister only with medical intervention. As July approached, I resolutely deflected memories of their births and yanked to

**PENELOPE STARR***TATTOO*

The first time I met my daughter was a phone conversation when she was forty-four years old. A stranger introduced us.

My phone rang at 8 a.m. one November morning in 2009. I thought it was odd because most of my friends know that I am not a morning person. I didn't recognize the number that flashed on caller ID, but for some reason, I picked up.

A woman's voice asked me, "Are you the person who was once known as (she had my maiden name)?" and then quickly added, "You don't have to answer my questions."

"Yes, that is me," I said simply. I knew there was always a possibility I would get this call and had long ago decided what I would do if it came.

"Did you give birth to a baby girl on (she had my daughter's birth date) in a New York hospital?" and again the reminder, "You don't have to answer if you don't want to." My hand holding the phone shook, and I started to weep.

"Yes, I did. She can contact me if she wants to. Who are you?"

"My name is Carol, and I help people find their birth parents. Your daughter hired me to locate you."

"Thank you, Carol," I said, staring at the phone after we hung up. I gulped air, wondering if I had remembered to breathe during that three-minute conversation.

Lowering myself into a chair at the kitchen table, I eyed my teacup as if it were a foreign object and glanced out the window to make sure that the mountains were still solidly bathed in morning light in the distance. Nothing had changed, yet everything felt surreal.

At four o'clock that afternoon, the phone rang. I watched another unknown number flash across my screen. She couldn't be calling me so soon. I was afraid that I couldn't talk. I waited through three rings, knowing that the call would go to voicemail on the fourth. Then I grabbed the phone.



My boyfriend Bob and I were living in Chapala, Mexico, the winter of 1965, and I thought I was throwing up because of the food or water or whatever causes the turista. I didn't suspect that I could be expecting because he told me he was sterile. But, after not getting my period for two months, I thought something was up, so we borrowed a car and drove into Guadalajara to have a pregnancy test. No one in the doctor's office spoke English, and the only words I knew in Spanish were leche and cerveza, but they managed to convey that I was pregnant.

Back at the casita, Bob said, "It's not my kid. I told you that I couldn't have any. Who the hell have you been sleeping with?"

Bob and I had been fighting pretty much ever since we got on the bus in New York City a month before to make the six-day journey to Chapala. I thought he was lazy because all he wanted was to sit in the courtyard of his favorite bar sipping tequila with his American buddy Lorenzo talking art and revolution. He thought I was a pain in the ass because I wanted to sightsee and learn Spanish. The idea of getting away from him seemed like a really good idea.

"You bastard, I'm leaving," I said, pulling my father's WW2 canvas duffle bag out of the closet, grabbing for my shoes, dungarees, and a few souvenirs I wasn't going to leave behind.

"You can't go by yourself, especially in your condition. And where would you go?"

"So now you are concerned for my welfare." Maybe he genuinely cared for me, or maybe he just didn't want to be alone in a foreign country; I didn't know, and I didn't care.

"I'll marry you even if it's not mine."

"No thanks." Marry someone I didn't even like. No way. I was nineteen years old and wasn't about to get tethered.

The next morning, I dragged my bag to the town square and caught a bus to California. As I sank into the swaying of the second-class bus, my anger faded as uncertainty crept in. What was I going to do? Of course, I could always go home to my parents, but this trip was my first excursion in the world as an independent adult, and I hated to admit defeat.

When I got to Los Angeles, I discovered I could buy a plane ticket to San Francisco for only twelve dollars and save myself from the nauseating

## GARY YOUNG

*"MY YOUNGEST SON CONSIDERS"*

My youngest son considers the effect of imaginary numbers on imaginary numbers. His brother ponders the duality of abstraction and specificity, while I wrestle with the concept of essential nature. We are pilgrims. The branch of a willow bounces off its reflection on the surface of a canal. Mallards bob in a murky pond. A crow tears at the body of a mouse on the gray tile roof of a temple.

## BETH CHRISTENSEN

*INSOMNIA*

They say that one of the worst things you can do for insomnia is to stay in bed, that if you get up and do something else, you might get sleepy. I don't really know if that's true, but most nights I get so desperate I'll believe almost any reasonable advice. Especially during those hours between *if I fall asleep now I might be able to make it through the day* and *if I fall asleep now I'll just feel worse when the alarm clock goes off*, I'm ready to try anything. Those are the hours when the harder I try to fall asleep, the less likely I am to do so. Those are the hours when even the silence is loud, when I find myself irritated by watching my husband Ben sleep, snoring, utterly unaware, and I have an intense urge to poke him with something sharp. Like I hate him for the way he falls asleep with no effort whatsoever—how can some people do that? Those are the hours when the numbers on the alarm clock seem as bright as Times Square, and I watch the long minutes pass by in red flashes. Those are the hours when I think of all the things I need to do that coming day but probably won't because I'll be too tired.

So, when it becomes obvious that I'm not going to fall asleep, I get up. I get out of bed carefully, moving gingerly away from my husband's sleep sounds and, pulling on my bathrobe if the house is chilly, I walk softly and quietly into the hallway. I don't wear slippers—I kind of like the feeling of my bare feet on the wood floors, cool and smooth, and I'm willing to take the risk that I might step on a wayward Lego block in the dark. When I pass my daughter Molly's room, I linger briefly, suspended in her sweet soft breathing and I have one of those parental moments, the kind in which my heart is so full of love and hope and fear that it literally aches. As I walk through the house, I am struck by how different it feels in these early pre-dawn hours from the daytime house. It's quiet except for the creaks that, I'm told, are caused by the house settling (whatever that means) and the hum of the air conditioner when it kicks on. I creep around as quietly as a burglar, and the cat looks at

**JAN CALLNER**

*OKAY, GOD*

Dear God i

*Okay, God. This is it.* The hospital cacophony evaporates when I slip through the chapel doors at St. Joseph's Medical Center. The room is empty, the wooden pews beckon, the silence in the chapel as deafening as the tumult outside. Sliding into one of the long benches, I pull down the kneeler, lean forward on my knees, and fold my hands in prayer. *I hope you're listening, God, 'cause this is the big one. I'm cashing in. Cashing in on every Sunday mass, the years of Catechism, the Novenas; cashing in on all those confessions and thousands of Hail Marys.*

The antiseptic medical smell is replaced by the faint whiff of lit candles emanating from the altar. Should I light a candle?

Words drone in my head—on a continual loop, *Dear God, please . . .* my eyes alternate closed and open, left and right. If only my left eye is shut, I can see the statue of Saint Joseph on the right side of the altar. Saint Joseph is the patron saint of workers. Dad is a worker, or he was. He worked for The Ford Motor Company. Maybe that will help. I add, *Saint Joseph, please help Dad. Saint Joseph, please help Dad.* If I close my right eye, I can see the statue of the Virgin Mary on the other side. Mary in her blue robe. I wonder if she had clothes of any different color. I always see her in blue. It suits her, I think.

Dad and I both made a Novena to Mary a few years ago; maybe she can put in a good word. "Please, Mary, intercede for Dad," I say out loud, the sound of my voice cracking in the silent room. Aloud, maybe she could hear it better. Both eyes close, and I'm back to, *Dear God, please . . .* I hold myself still so as not to interfere with the strength of the prayer.

I'm a good prayer, focused, intense, creative.

"Whatever you ask in Jesus' name, you will receive." Those are the words I inherited from the nuns when I was twelve. They, those all-knowing women, said it could only be used for something extremely important. I have



## MELVIN STERNE

### *THE REST OF THE STORY*

My father was a *jack-of-all-trades-and-master-of-none*. A man who could get things done. It didn't much matter what. Carpentry. Roofing. Cement. Pipe. He could run wire and lay bricks or tile or carpet. He did welding. He could push a dozer or fly a crane. I've seen him pick apples, flip burgers, dig ditches, cut grass, milk goats, tend bar, and sell encyclopedias door-to-door. But he was most himself when whatever the job was, it was *his* job. No forms to fill out, no hoops to jump. A project to finish with a fat payday.

He wasn't big and he wasn't good-looking. He was wiry and strong. Sinewy is a good word for it. Scraggly, they say out west. But he carried himself bigger than he looked, and people noticed. Some liked it. Some didn't. He was careless with his hair and about shaving. He wouldn't dress up. He'd say, "I'm a Levi's-and-T-shirt kind of a guy." But he could talk. He meant what he said, and said what he meant. That confidence got him work.

But his schemes—no matter how good they looked on paper—never paid out like they should. It wasn't for lack of trying. He was up before dawn and home after midnight. Most of the year I didn't see dad except Sunday afternoons. In retrospect, I wonder about that. There was always something. A blown gizmo. A truck repair. A medical bill. A fire. A flood. Taxes. Insurance due. One of those "god-dammit" people complain about. *Life's a bitch and then you die. I'm gone go get a beer.*

Summertime, when I was out of school, if he was into one of those gigs, I might go with him, helping out the best I could, and watching in wonder when he did things that I thought couldn't be done. Like the afternoon in New Mexico I watched my father lever a thousand-pound cottonwood stump up a makeshift ramp and into the back of his pickup truck. My father might have weighed one-fifty.

My mother, God bless her, wasn't much good at taking care of me. She was depressed because she drank, and she drank because she was depressed.

Dad could take care of himself, but there were plenty of times she couldn't take care of herself, let alone me. And when that happened there were neighbors, or friends, or relatives someplace. Or else I was on my own. And when she was home and my father was home, they fought. So maybe that was why I looked forward to time alone with my dad.

And maybe my mother was on a bender that day, or maybe dad took me along for no reason at all. But she was off someplace, and dad had a job down by Las Cruces clearing a patch of land. So he took me with him, and I was glad. I was thirteen and riding in a truck to work. I wore my oldest jeans and my newest boots.

My father had rules and made sure I knew them. *Take care of your tools and they'll take care of you. Measure twice, cut once. Do it right or do it over. Work now, play later. You only got one name and one reputation, don't blow it. Take pride in your work.* He did things *by the book* and he expected me (and anybody working for him) to do the same. And he kept a schedule. Breakfast at five. Coffee at ten. Lunch at noon. But at three-thirty—without fail—it was afternoon break by the radio. At three-thirty-five Paul Harvey was on, and his program *The Rest of the Story*. Paul Harvey was like the voice of God to my father.

Nobody talked when Paul Harvey was on. It was like church. We listened in rapt reverence to that smooth, mid-American, eloquence—a voice both throaty and nasally at the same time. It was a friendly voice, but a voice of authority. You didn't argue with Paul Harvey. The old man used to say, "Paul Harvey could sell ice to Eskimos."

And I still remember the story we listened to that day, riding in the truck in the hot New Mexico sun. It was about George Westinghouse and his feud with Thomas Edison. The point of the story was that George Westinghouse gambled everything he owned that alternating current was the power of the future, and it turned out that way, and George Westinghouse got very rich for believing in himself. It was a good story. But when it was over, dad slapped the radio off with a bloody hand and said, "Bull *shit*."

My father wasn't educated, but he wasn't stupid, either. I've seen him take a pencil and sketch a blueprint on cardboard and explain the layout to an engineer—symbols and all. And he could do math. Add. Subtract. Multiply. Divide. Volume. Trigonometry. I've seen him convert degrees of angle to feet of radius all in his head. He knew the weight of brick and tile and mortar from memory. And iron. And shingles. He knew how much a good two-by-

## LOWELL JAEGER

### *WE'D PLANNED*

to pull the blinds,  
uncork champagne,  
jitterbug naked  
—your mother and I—  
inside the empty nest.

You slammed the hatch  
on your Subaru, its bursting load  
of fantasies and mysteries boxed,  
pillowcases stuffed  
with plush bears.  
Smiled, waved, honked,  
and sped away. Our last,  
at last  
college bound.

We stood at the window  
—your mother and I—  
inhaling, exhaling.

She simmered a Mexican stew  
later that afternoon, which  
side-by-side across from your place  
at the table, we sipped  
with tender bewilderment,  
  
spoon by spoon.

