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"FIRST YOU STEAL A CHICKEN..."

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ABSTRACT

"FIRST YOU STEAL A CHICKEN..."

By

Linda Nagy Heard

"First You Steal a Chicken..." is a daughter's creative non-fiction memoir of her Hungarian-born father, Alex Nagy. Through a series of literary essays the author not only creates a portrait of the man, but also portrays the numerous ways her father's attitudes, passions, aptitudes, and ethnicity influenced the person she ultimately became.

There is an old Hungarian joke that goes:

"Would you like my recipe for chicken paprikash?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"Well, first you steal a chicken..."

Apámnak. For my father.

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INTRODUCTION

During 1962, my freshman year in college, I wrote seven short stories. While character and location varied slightly, they shared a common theme. They were all about very clever, terribly witty, and somewhat jaded middle aged adults whose lives revolved around money and martinis. Every single story was returned marked "Write what you know." So I stopped writing about uptown swells. But I didn't stop writing.

A combination of single motherhood and the need to earn a regular income pushed my writing into new directions. Instead of sophisticated short stories, I wrote magazine feature articles, press releases, political speeches and newsletters. Hundreds and hundreds of them. It was a job. It was how I earned my living.

Fast forward 30 years.

In the fall of my 50th year I attended a women's studies conference at Michigan State University. The final session included three local women writers reading from recently published works. And sitting upstairs in the Union, gazing out at the afternoon sun filtering through the golden maples, I said to myself, "I can do that." I applied for graduate school the very next day.

Of course, a decision of such magnitude didn't spring solely from an afternoon of selected readings. It had probably been roiling around in there for years. Perhaps I

returned because both my sons had master's degrees and I wanted to keep up. Or maybe I returned because I've been an inveterate class taker all my life, and it was time to take classes that counted for something, a grade, a credit, or a degree. Or maybe I returned because my father, too, was a life-long learner, learning the banjo, the harmonica, French, photography, and calligraphy, all in the second half of his life. It is also possible that I returned to school because every day I feel compelled to prove myself over and over again. Or maybe it was the active and vibrant 97 year old woman I know who said the secret of her longevity was "to learn something new every day."

Most likely, however, I returned because I write. Because I have always written. And because I wanted to continue to write differently – and better.

Maybe it is simply, as George Mallory replied when asked why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest, "Because it is there." I can't explain it. Graduate school was *there.*

During my first semester of graduate school, I juggled *schoolwork* with the demands of a full-time public relations executive and frequent mid-week trips to visit my father some 70 miles away. After a decade of failing health, he had entered the hospital the day I started graduate school. It was to be his last hospital stay. He died March 4, 1994, mid-way through my first semester, on the first day of the university's spring break. His funeral was the final day of my scheduled "vacation." And my heart ached for the sweet young man in my literature class who so persistently inquired the following Monday how I had spent my holiday.

Graduate school was a revelation. Contemporary literature was no longer Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Auster and Acker were younger than I was. bell hooks was born while I was a high school freshman. And Sherman Alexie was born the year I graduated college.

The best part was the writing. First I wrote poetry, learning early on the complex skills and emotion it required, skills I have yet to perfect. Then I wrote short stories, a genre for which I felt more suited. I had imagination, I had emotion, I could tell a tale. And now I had *experience.* For a while, I tinkered with a novella, a first-person account of four people whose lives intersect in a chemotherapy treatment waiting room. Their characters were initially defined by the shoes they wore, since initially that's where their eyes tended to fix. There was Mr. Cole Haan, Ms. Birkenstock, Mr. Wolverine Boot, and tiny Miss Nike. I was Ms. Ferragamo. Each character's stand-alone story was woven into the others during their weekly chemo appointments. I called it *Contradance* and I suspected it might become my Master's thesis. I was intrigued with the form, obsessed with the dance imagery, and interested in the characters. But my commitment was half-hearted and my writing showed it. It lacked passion.

It wasn't until a class in creative non-fiction that my mission became clear.

For more than 35 years, creative writing instructors had been saying, "Write what you know" and this literary form seemed to bolster that instruction. In addition, during my lifetime of reading, I continue to renegotiate that fine line between fiction and non-

fiction, between memory and what actually happened, between a personal "reality" and what is really real. Is all fiction *really* autobiographical? Can we write of another without writing of ourselves? Creative non-fiction fuels the debate. I had also been raised in a household where real life experiences were constantly embellished, exaggerated, and retold as entertaining tales. I admired the art. And lastly, there is something in the sincerity or "truth" of such stories that just plain touches my heart.

Our first task in that class was, simply put, to write an essay about a photograph. That was the assignment in its entirety. In my office at my right hand I keep a small photo of my father and me. It is oval shaped, sepia-toned in a small gold frame, a summer vacation photo, taken at a lake. My father sits, smiling, on an overturned peeling wooden rowboat, and I stand on the boat next to him in the circle of his left arm. His right hand rests protectively on my knee. I am about 18 months old, which would make him about 28. He is tan and lean and handsome. I am mosquito-bitten, bow-legged and blond. My socks are droopy and my shoes are scuffed. I look at that picture every day. But when I looked at the photograph as a class assignment, I simply saw my father's legs. Young legs, tan legs, firm, muscular legs. Legs that had carried him through a lifetime of travels and experiences.

It was then I knew I was ready to do what writing instructors had been urging all my life. I wanted to write what was real and what was remembered. I wanted to write about my father.

I chose my father as a subject because I knew him and loved him and because I wanted others to know him too. I wanted to do it because he didn't linger long enough to see me receive my degree. I wanted to do it because, in the rush of things to be done immediately after a family member dies, I'd never gotten to write a proper obituary, and I'd always felt badly about that. I wanted to capture him on paper. And I wanted to make him proud.

While on the surface, the project may appear to be a fine and well-intentioned one, I soon realized it was fraught with risk, not for fear of some secret revelation that may emerge, but specifically because there *weren't* any. My intent was to write a loving and nostalgic tribute. But how do you write about a parent who is admired and adored without appearing myopic, idealistic, and naive? How does one capture a sensitive, smart and funny father without sounding too soft and soppy? How do you describe a sentimental and romantic character without sounding sentimental and romantic yourself?

There was no dysfunction, no anger, no tension, and few disappointments. Would his story turn into a teary-eyed, syrupy story by Daddy's Little Girl? He was bigger than life. He was colorful and charismatic. He made people laugh. His passion and enthusiasm were contagious. And he had lived the life he dreamed of living. Everyone loved Al Nagy. But could I make anyone outside the family really *care?*

I turned to other writers for guidance, devouring family memoirs. Ianthe Brautigan wrote painfully about her poet father's battle with alcoholism and mental illness. Mary Gordon

wrote courageously about the duplicity and betrayal she discovered when she set out to discover who her father really was. Greg Bottoms, in *Angelhead,* describes an anguished childhood growing up with a violent and schizophrenic older brother. And Laurie Fox, in *My Sister From the Black Lagoon,* chronicles a similar childhood with her sister. From Christina Crawford's *Mommy, Dearest* to David Pelzer's *A Man Named Dave*, the memoirs that captivate, the ones that entertain and enthrall, appeared to be the ones that detailed injustices, rejection, illness, and abuse, either physical or psychological. What interest would there be in this sympathetic and loving portrait? Where was the conflict? Where was the tension?

That was my challenge as I began to unpack memories of my father to assemble and arrange for public view.

Then another turning point. At my advisor's behest, I read Calvin Trillin's *Messages from my Father* and Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie.* And I realized through these two simple, loving accounts that the story of the man extends far beyond the story of a father or a teacher. The story is really in how the father/teacher shapes us, both during their lives and after they are gone.

My account was not just about my father, it was about our relationship, a bond that transcended the typical father/daughter connection. We were sometimes business associates, often confidants, occasionally conspirators, and always, in his words, "pals"

until the end. And through my writing I came to realize that the bond existed because we were so much alike.

By shifting my focus from looking at my father to looking at me through the lens of my father, I suddenly began to see, not just him, but the *me* in him. It was impossible for me to write about Al Nagy without writing about Linda Nagy Heard. Thus the work became a revelation of how and why this remarkable man formed my character, shaped my attitudes, and influenced my tastes.

There is a final reason for writing on my father. I have never been a particularly religious person. That is not to say I am *ir*-religious. It's just that during my adult life I have never professed allegiance to any single denomination or church. Much like my approach to learning, I am always open to new ideas. And I do think about death and what happens after. A lot. While lyrical images of milk and honey, pearly-gates, and long-awaited reunions with departed loved ones are imaginative and compelling, they fail to comfort me. I have struggled, in varying degrees, with the meaning of life and loss, but have come up empty in terms of a satisfying answer.

Recently, however, I am beginning to see the pain of loss as a gift. Grief allows us to focus on the things that are gone, and it is through those memories that we resurrect our loved ones. Remember how every time the family attended a circus, a concert, a baseball game or a play, somewhere en route my father would inevitably say, "We should have brought the piano"? And we would dutifully ask why and he would reply "Because the

tickets are on it"? And how we would laugh? Remember how we got so mad when he capriciously changed the rules in croquet? Remember when the strolling gypsies followed him out of the Budapest restaurant and serenaded him down the street singing the old Hungarian songs? Suddenly that someone is there again. We've brought him back to life. A new life. Everlasting life. Life after death.

So memory itself becomes a metaphor for eternal life. The loss brings pain, pain triggers memory, and the memory resurrects the departed who turns our tears to joy.

And so we re-tell the stories. We recall the moments. We repeat the jokes. Turning pain into joy. Bringing a father, a husband, a grandfather, a friend back into our lives. Comforting us. Knowing it's the sharing of the stories that keeps him alive.

His stories. My stories.

World without end.

Amen.

RITUALS

LEGS

For most, a picture like this might recall rickety summer cottages with screen doors that bang. Turtles in coffee cans stoically awaiting release. Chafing sand on stiff air-dried sheets against a sunburned back. The sweet ooze of blackened marshmallows around a smoky beachfront fire. And falling asleep to the strange sounds of crickets as they frantically rub their legs together in a summer night serenade.

Legs. That's what strikes me about this picture. The legs. My father's legs. Lean and fine, covered with golden fuzz (invisible to the camera), brown from a week in the sun. He was 28 years old in this picture. And I was two. My stubby little legs are bowed, scabbed and mosquito-bit. His are long and muscular. A young man's legs. An athlete's legs. My father's legs.

Legs that paced the deck of an aircraft carrier in the South Pacific in November, 1944 as he awaited a telegram announcing my birth. Legs that propelled him on skates to a near career in professional hockey. Legs that leisurely strolled across Havana's Plaza de Armas on month-long Cuban holiday where he walked past Batista (or so he said) eating ice cream one sun-filled afternoon. Legs that sauntered from a Danube restaurant as he sang Hungarian folk songs, trailed by adoring gypsy violinists, like some Pied Piper

followed for his tunes. Legs that danced the *czardas* with my patent leather shoes perched on his feet.

And for more than forty years, long before Nike was a "swoosh", legs that carried him through silent, early morning streets as bleary-eyed neighbors (and occasionally an alert policeman) scratched their heads and asked "why does he run?"

My father's legs gave hundreds of horsy rides, kicked a bazillion footballs, and logged a million miles. A newspaper photographer once snapped my father's photo as he diligently jogged past a local funeral home. A lover of things ironic, it became his favorite photo.

Those legs were my struts, my base, the pedestal where his princess reigned over magical times, as he'd hoist me to his shoulders to get the greatest view. Thanksgiving Day parades, the arrival of the circus, a sandlot baseball game behind the home plate fence. I saw them all propped by my father's legs.

Late in my father's life, when his spirit became dull and discouraged, he suddenly took an interest in designing a wheelchair ramp for his church. He lobbied, he labored, and we celebrated, as his chair rolled its maiden voyage up the finished ramp. Then he slowly slumped back into his gentle but inexorable decline.

During my father's final days, I sit by his bed in intensive care, lulled by the rhythmic "swoosh" of the respirator. It keeps time like some muffled metronome, futilely urging him to get up, walk, kick, dance and run. But his legs are pale lifeless sticks now, marked with broken veins and garish purple bruises, denying any previous exposure to Coppertone and summer sun.

And then I remember this picture. I hurry home and pull it out and stare, not at his legs but at mine. My stubby little sidewalk-scarred legs. Legs that have walked along the Seine. And danced the *czardas*. And run 10Ks. And jumped from airplanes. And schussed at Vail. And bounced a child. And skated across a lake with the wind at my back. I walk. I kick. I dance. I run. All on my father's legs.

The legs. That's what strikes me about this picture. The legs.

MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER

"I am my father's daughter and I am not afraid."

Elizabeth Rex, upon her Coronation

* * *

When I was about 12 years old, I discovered a packet of letters and poems that my father had written my mother during World War II while he was serving in the South Pacific. They were tied with ribbon and tucked away in the bottom drawer of his tall, maple dresser. Do not ask what I was doing there. I don't remember.

Many of the letters were written while my mother was living with her parents in Detroit awaiting my birth. The letters were written on thin, crackling parchment in his own distinctive rounded, looping script. In the first letter, my father wrote:

> *"What unimaginable fun we'll have when I return home to my new family. I can hardly wait. There are so many things I want to share. If it's a boy I'll take him on fishing trips to Duck Lake. We'll play football in the front yard. We'll go to Olympia and watch the Red Wings play. (Maybe when he's older I'll take him to Cuba and show him how his old dad spent his bachelor days!) I'll take him to my office and show him my drafting table and introduce him to my boss. I'll teach him how to fix things. And someday I'll teach him to drive. When I get home we'll start saving for a car. And*

college! Just imagine! At least we know our son will be smart and good looking – I have you to thank for that!

"Oh my dear Ingrid I miss you so. My heart breaks that I can't simply transport myself beyond this ugly conflict and be at your side to hold your hand to witness the birth of our first child..."

Of course he got me instead. And because of his war duty he didn't even lay eyes on me until 18 months after I was born. Legend has it that when he walked into the room, I screamed and ran the other way. It took him a while to win my heart. Four years later, my sister, Nancy, arrived. And the Nagy family was complete.

So suddenly, after 12 years of what I assumed was a loving and secure family life, I learned that perhaps I wasn't his first choice, that, while he was a loving father to me throughout his life, perhaps I somehow disappointed him. Just by being a girl.

My initial hurt healed quickly and by the next day I was back to living my life as any normal 12 year old. But, although I didn't know it then, those few lines written on tissue-thin Air Mail notepaper would change the course of my life.

* * *

Now some things we inherit, I know. Certain traits, certain talents, certain behaviors, I believe, are embedded deep in our DNA, and are as inevitable as our blue eyes or big

feet. Other characteristics are passed on through imitation. We become what we see. When I saw my father weep copiously at "Gone With the Wind" I knew it was acceptable to cry in public. When I saw him spontaneously hug and kiss the people he cared about I knew it was fine to display affection.

But there is a third category, not based on heredity nor environment, but on *wanting* to be. If my father loved John Wayne movies and saw that I loved John Wayne movies too, wouldn't he love me more? And if I had worries that he loved me less for being a girl, would he not at least love me a little more if I shunned the girl role and embraced boy things?

He loved hockey. I loved hockey. He followed football. I followed football. He proudly mastered trigonometry. I mastered trig as well.

I inherited his exquisite hand for calligraphy, and we took lessons together to refine our skills. We both wrote ragged doggerel on demand for any occasion. We sang duets, tenor and alto, to my hesitant piano accompaniment. He eventually got to Paris. Later so did I. And we both got by on our enthusiastic but fractured French. He yearned to visit Budapest, to seek his roots. And in 1989, my family met there and explored it together. Early on I learned to prepare an authentic Hungarian chicken paprikash. I love the music. Some day I'll learn the language.

He was strong, competent, and self-sufficient. As a single mother, so was I. As a businessman he was smart, aggressive and competitive. In my business dealings, I was as well. As a travel writer, I was independent, fearless and pretty damn good. "Just like your father" people always said.

"I'll teach him how to fix things."

My father also demonstrated remarkable ingenuity in home repairs. He knew how to build things and how to fix things. But mostly he was good at "jerry-rigging", coming up with perhaps not the Good Housekeeping approved method, but one that, with a roll of duct tape and a few wooden matchsticks, would certainly correct the condition.

It's not that he avoided proper procedures. He simply demonstrated creativity and downright cleverness. He knew shortcuts. He also taught me that sometimes the "fix" is simply a matter of taking the offending appliance apart and putting it back together.

The skills he taught have served me well. And sometimes now, when I come up with a particularly innovative solution to a household problem, I just look up and smugly smile.

I'm often told a story about a time when I was four years old and we lived in a downstairs flat where my parents were landlords. The house was heated by a huge, black, coal-burning behemoth of a basement furnace. For such a rock-solid piece of equipment, it was surprisingly temperamental. One day, as my father busied himself in the basement

trying to restore the heat, I padded down the stairs, bundled in my thick grandma-knit sweater, prepared to help. "Watch me fix it, daddy," I was reported to have said. Then, giving the furnace a swift kick, I shouted, "Goddamn furnace!"

Just like your father.

Even today, when all ingenuity and creativity fail, and I feel I'm on the losing side of the battle between Woman and Machine, I sometimes give the offending appliance a swift kick and repeat my father's words. It seldom solves the problem, but there is something to be said for ritual.

Recently, an hour before dinner guests were expected, my garbage disposal backed up. With a sink full of foul, brackish water that refused to go down even an inch, I looked under the sink to assess just how the darn thing was put together. Noting that the pipes were plastic and the fittings looked manageable even with my bony wrists, I got a rubber jar opener out of the drawer and a bucket out of the laundry room, and set to work. Within 30 minutes, I had "deconstructed" the entire under-sink plumbing system, found the offending blockage, cleaned it out, and reassembled the pipes into their original configuration. A test run produced nary a leak. The floor under the piping was a dry as my mouth before midterms.

Rocky with his knockout of Apollo Creed could not have been prouder. I danced around the the kitchen, rubber-gloved fists in the air, shouting, "YESSSSSS! I am WOMAN!

Hear me ROAR!" so loudly that my neighbor crossed the hall to see if I needed help. I answered the door still wearing the requisite rubber gloves as well as a bit of the sludge I had unclogged. "HELP???" I yelled. " HA!" "FIE on HELP! I am WOMAN! Watch me PLUMB!"

By the time the rest of the guests arrived I had composed myself enough to tell the story over our '97 Puligny-Montrachet with a casual nonchalance

"It was nothing. Really. I just love fixing things."

Just like your father.

"...we 'll play football in the front yard."

Other than that one letter, no one would imagine he ever considered alternatives to his two daughters. And in many ways he raised us like sons. We were assertive in opinions and aggressive in sports. I studied to be an architect. But I also had memorized the NFL playbook.

When we weren't outside catching passes, or swinging a baseball bat, we were inside in front of our 17-inch black and white TV watching the Tigers, the Lions, or his beloved Wings. And my sister can still throw a forward pass that will make your hands sting.

With all that in mind, last Saturday I took my 80-year old mother to a college football game. Not just *any* college. The University of Michigan. My alma mater. We joined 110,000 other enthusiastic fans on a glorious autumn Saturday in Ann Arbor. It was perfect. But as we sat high in the stands watching a tense and hard-fought battle, a funny thing happened. My mother started asking questions.

"Why are they moving the ball back?" "What was the penalty for?" "Why didn't our player grab that punt?" "How many time outs do they get?" "Why are they kicking?" And as I kept up a steady flow of information, sometimes impatient, sometimes extraordinarily instructional, I realized how much like my father I sounded.. "Because Number 31 just grabbed the guy's facemask. It's a ten-yard penalty." "Because he's hoping it will roll farther toward the goal line so the other team will have to take over deeper down the field." "There are three time outs to a half." "It's fourth DOWN and they still have eight yards to GO!"

Impatient. Instructive. Intense.

Just like your father.

My father also embraced adventure and taking a risk. I para-sailed, glider planed, and skydived from 10,000 feet. He worshiped the Hungarian-born Tony Curtis and adored the film *Trapeze.* I took trapeze lessons and flew through the air. He loved to dance. I took ballroom lessons and installed a mirrored ball in my living room. Later in life (*too*

late, my instructor bluntly said) I took ballet lessons. And when I realized my legs were too short and stiff for ballerina status I tied on my tap shoes, joined a tap class, and clacked across the floor of a local dance studio to *New York New York.* He joked, I joked. He wept, I wept. He wrote, I wrote.

Just like your father.

***

As my father spent what were to be his final days in intensive care, he was fed intravenously, but given occasional ice chips to moisten his fever-parched lips and dry throat. His voice was weak and talking was a struggle. As one sweet young nurse finished her ministrations, she tucked him in and kindly inquired if there was anything she could get him. He peered at her blearily, blinked, then smiled, and croaked, "How about a cold Stroh's?"

I repeated the story in his eulogy.

Several months ago I had minor outpatient surgery at a local hospital. And as I lay in recovery, a nurse solicitously asked if there was anything she could get me. "How about a cold Labatt's," I groggily replied. A cold beer?!?!? I no more wanted a cold beer than a plate of anchovies!

Just like your father.

His dreams became my dreams, his accomplishments my goals. But is it possible that all my skills, all my achievements came about simply because I wanted to be loved *in spite of the fact that I was a girl?* Perhaps. But the reality is that that love was being offered generously, profusely, and unconditionally every day. Not *in spite of* the fact that I was a girl. Not *because of* the fact that I was a girl. But because I was his child. He taught me all he knew. I AM my father's daughter. And I am not afraid. Just like my father.

THE TANGO DANCE

Last fall, on a trip to New York, I cadged a pair of tickets to *Tango Argentina*, the hot new dance review that *The New Yorker* called "the sexiest, most glamorous, most virtuosic dancing on Broadway." The evening was swell. I wore a Chanel dress and my companion wore a tux. After the show we drank Manhattans, critiqued the performance, and lazily shared New York gossip with our friends. Not one of them suspected that for three hours that night I sat with a burning in my belly and a hot, aching tightness in my heart, longing for those nights when my mother and my father practiced the Tango on our bare living room floor.

When I was ten, my mother and father signed up for lessons at Arthur Murray. Not from the real Arthur Murray. But from one of the hundreds of neighborhood dance studios that sprang up in the suburbs in the early 50s. Dance lessons were a huge extravagance in those days. But Thursday night at Arthur Murray's was their "date" night, their big night out. My mother would wear her silky brown shirtwaist with the full-circle skirt, the one with the huge white flowers. And as she walked out the front door with my father, her laughter, along with the smell of Pond's hand cream and Tabu, would waft back and linger the rest of the night. Sometimes it was the first time I'd heard her laugh that day.

And I remember, too, nights of sitting quietly on a chair in the corner watching them practice their samba steps down the length of our ranch house living room. The house was brand new, and carpeting was still on the wish list. Instead, shiny vinyl tiles covered

all the floors and bounced a hollow, ringing echo to our every sound. The living room was long and narrow, 12 feet wide but perhaps twice that long. So, despite its aesthetic and acoustic shortcomings, it made for a perfect place to practice dance.

I remember my mother coming out of the kitchen after the supper dishes were done, untying her apron and pushing back her damp hair from her slightly flushed face. My father, still in his suit pants and white shirt, would put down his *Detroit News* and smile. He would slowly toss his loosened necktie aside and casually unbutton the second button on his shirt, to display just a glimpse of the curly black hair on his chest. Then he would stand and approach my mother, hand outstretched.

"*Salimos?*" he would ask. "Shall we?"

She would smile shyly and take his hand, almost as if they were about to dance for the very first time.

I was in charge of the record player. My father would carefully stack the heavy black 78 rpms next to the turntable in the order of their dance card that night. Every week there was a new dance to practice. And oh my, didn't they dance. They rhumba'd, they quick-stepped, they mambo'd, they waltzed. But every practice session ended with the same dance. *El Tango Danza.* The Tango Dance. Even today it sends a thrill. The Tango. My first flirtation with sex.

If you've ever seen the true tango, you know it's more than just an intricate dance. It's a feeling. It's message is one of loneliness -- and lust. The Tango was created by men, mostly from Europe, who fled their bleak lives on the continent to seek new lives in South America. They left families, wives and lovers behind. During the day they worked in the packing houses in Buenos Aires or along the docks of the Rio de le Plata. At night they slept five and six to a room, if they were lucky. If not, they slept on the street. After work they would gather at the *pulperias*, the bars, where they would drink harsh red wine and sing sad songs about the women left behind.

Eventually South American women, many of them prostitutes, made their way to the ports, to earn a living and ease the immigrants' loneliness. And the tango emerged as the ultimate aphrodisiac. The whores earned their money and, for a few hours, the workers weren't lonely any more.

If you watch the dancers closely, you'll see that, while the leg work is intricate and intimate, all the movement is from the waist down. The upper body remains stiff and erect. Gazes are intense but distant. It's as if lust is focused below the belt and love from the waist up. This dance is all about lust.

The dance begins with the *abrazo*, the pose. My parents would stand motionless, like statues, waiting for the thin sad strains of the accordion to pierce the silence. At the first poignant notes, they would smoothly execute the *salida*, that initial stately slide onto the dance floor. A single violin would join the lament. Then, as if the violin was drawing

them down the dance floor, they would glide effortlessly to the four/eight beat. Walk, walk, side, together. Walk, walk, side, together. And the piano joins to complete the typical tango trio.

In the tango, the male controls with his eyes. And while the dance was invented by men, you can quickly discern that it is really the woman's dance. The man is the lynchpin, the pivot, standing tall and staid, while the woman executes her intricate footwork around him.

I remember my father standing, back ramrod straight, stone faced, head turned arrogantly to the side, as my mother performed complicated *pasa doubles* around his planted leg. Then the *llevada,* as he would take her in his arms and use his upper thigh to "carry" her leg to the next step. Again he would glide her the length of the living room in the *caminada* walk, bodies tight together, feet in perfect sync, their dance steps echoing on the tile floor.

It was from my corner chair one night, listening to the haunting strains of "*La Cumparsita,*" that I felt a strange sensation in my stomach. An unfamiliar stirring. An empty feeling, yet at the same time full, swollen, satiated. I watched my mother as she lightly brushed her hand across my father's neck. And suddenly I *knew.* I knew there was something between them. Not just that pat-on-the rear affection as my father passed through the kitchen. More than the kiss-on-the-cheek goodbye. Something way more. I

felt the heat. I sensed the passion. Something smoldered between these two. Something drew them. Something sizzled.

At ten, sex was not yet part of my vocabulary, so I couldn't even name it. But even if sex had been identified, it wouldn't have been in the sense that they "did" it. It was more that they *had* it. They owned it. They possessed it. They *reeked* of it. Sensuality. Passion. Wanting each other. Lust. My mother and my father had *sex*. And that sex, that eroticism, never visible during our habitual humdrum days, oozed out through their pores and lay mixed with their sweat, wet and shining on their flesh, when they danced.

I watched fascinated as my father's smoldering gaze remained over my mother's shoulder, fixed on some distant spot. And I stared as, after a whirling turn, my mother stood on one foot, the other hanging relaxed, and literally hung with all her weight tight against my father while they hotly gazed into each other eyes. I was mesmerized as my father "trapped" her leg between his in a *mordida*, then effortlessly, almost carelessly, bent her to the side in an exaggerated and dramatic dip. I was transfixed as they moved, pelvis to pelvis, to the throbbing strains. I felt a hot flush surging through my body. And I was embarrassed, not knowing quite why. I felt I was watching something forbidden, but I couldn't take my eyes away. I smelled their passion. I sensed their longing. I saw their undisguised lust. And I didn't even know the words.

* * *

For their 25th wedding anniversary, I took my parents to the theatre to see *Evita*, the passionate story of Eva and Juan Peron. I remember watching Eva and Juan as they danced together for the very first time in a crowded, smoky Argentine bar. It was a steamy, sultry, smoldering tango. And as they glided in that perfect *caminada* walk across the dusky low-lit dance hall floor, I glanced over at my father. His eyes were misted over with that long-ago look. His gaze never left the stage as he reached over and squeezed my mother's hand. And, once again, I saw the distant Tango in his eyes.

KITTIES

"In our many moves from one small coal town to another after my mother's arrival in the USA in 1914, her most sorrowful recollection was one of tearfully having to sell her milk cows in each town, packing up their few pieces of furniture and taking a train to the next obscure little coal town. I remember the bleak unpainted houses furnished by the company, all alike in a row, the coal stoves, the bath tubs in the kitchen, and the constant terror of mine accidents, but most of all I remember her love of animals, especially her cows. Years later in Detroit when driving with the family on a Sunday afternoon, she would often insist that we stop at some farm in the country while we went over to the fence to pet some ol' brown-eyes bossie."

Memoir of A.J. Nagy, 1981

1/10 – Poor Kitty is so sick – will probably die. I must take him to a vet tomorrow.

A.J. Nagy diary, 1937

* * *

In 1922, my father and his family moved to Lynch, Kentucky where my grandfather found work in the coal mines. There were five of them. Money was tight. My father was four.

My grandmother was a hard-working Hungarian woman whose days were spent cooking, scrubbing, and washing clothes in rusted tin tubs outside the back door, while trying to coax vegetables from their scrubby little plot of land behind the clapboard house. Her

day-to-day existence could not have held many pleasures. But one place she found her joy was in animals. The mangy dogs that roamed the hills. The stray cats that gathered by the back porch. And even the sad-eyed old cow that provided their scanty milk rations. My grandmother would cup her big, bony face in her hands, look into her eyes and whisper comforting Hungarian nothings in her ears. Maybe they displayed a vulnerability she identified with. Who knows? But the animals brought out a tenderness in her that was seldom exhibited elsewhere in her life.

During the summer of 1922, their main barn cat, *Kedvesem* (Hungarian for "dear"), had a litter of kittens. Six of them, each a tiny little curled ball of fur that even four-year-old hands could completely enfold. My father and my grandmother were smitten with love and spent every free minute hunched over the new family in the dark corner of the shed.

But times were hard and money was scarce. And to my gruff and burdened grandfather, the kittens were more mouths to feed, however small. So one afternoon he gathered up a burlap bag and a piece of rope, went into the shed and placed the kittens in the bag. Then he took my father's hand, and walked down to the river. Along the river bank he gathered several rocks and placed them in the bag along with the mewling kittens. Then he tied the bag shut, walked out onto the bridge and dropped the bag into the water -- with my horrified father looking on. The bag bobbed for a moment on the surface, then quickly sank to the bottom of the river. They watched until the bag disappeared, then, without a word, he and my father walked back to the house.

***

My father loved and admired his father, for the sacrifices this uneducated Hungarian immigrant made for his family and the future he built for them. I remember my father's tears as my grandfather lay dying, an old and broken man at 65. But then I flash back to that four-year-old boy, in knickers and cap, watching the wiggling bag of kittens drop, float for a moment, then sink into the muddy river.

THE BIRTHDAY

"I remember the cablegram that arrived aboard ship telling me of the birth of my daughter. It was terrible to be so far away at a time like that and even the joy of being a father couldn't erase the emptiness of the thousands of miles that lay between my family and me. The cable was ten days late, no later than my mail usually was, and the relief of finally knowing that the waiting was over was as welcome as the rainy season which accompanied it."

Memoir of A.J. Nagy, 1981

When my father was alive, it was a birthday tradition that as soon as we were all settled at the table with our birthday dinner beverage, he would tell the story of the day of my birth. It was during World War II. He was serving on a landing craft somewhere in the South Pacific. I was two weeks overdue. Communications were unreliable. And as a joke, someone sent him a telegram that he was the father of triplets, a boy and two girls.

We always laughed, not just at the memory of the telegram, but at all the memories the re-telling has generated over the years. I still have the telegram.

Jeff asked my mother if she had been pregnant when my father shipped out, a question I had never thought to ask. She replied that she had not known, but that she had notified him of her pregnancy by letter when he was overseas. Then she looked Jeff squarely in

the eyes and declared, "I went to a fertility doctor in Florida a few months before he shipped out."

"WHAT?!?" I yelled. First of all, I didn't even know fertility doctors *existed* in 1943 and I certainly had no idea that my parents consulted one.

"WHY???" I asked.

She paused.

"Because your father felt that if anything happened to him overseas, he wanted to be sure I had something to remember him by."

Something to remember him by. *Me.*

Just like this memoir. Something to remember him by.

CRABBING

Car trips with my father were something akin to World War II military maneuvers with the objective being to move a family of four and two weeks worth of provisions a distance of 752 miles in the most efficient manner possible.

Several days before our trip to the Eastern Shore he would take out his cigar box of magic markers and a couple white shirt cardboards, spread a map of the eastern United States over the dining room table, and start mapping his route. Literally. He knew exactly the number of miles to Ocean City, Maryland. He knew precisely the number of miles between each turnpike exit. He also knew the number of miles to the gallon our 1954 Mercury could be expected to achieve. That meant he could project the location of every single gas stop we would make on the 12-hour trip. It also meant he could calculate the exact time we would make those stops. I knew what an E.T.A. was when I was eight years old.

Food and rest stops were not scheduled. The last thing to be packed into the front seat at my mother's feet was a large wicker hamper of sandwiches, pickles, potato chips, and fruit she had packed, thus eliminating the need for meal stops. And restroom stops had to coincide with gas stops. If you had to go to the bathroom, and I mean even if it was *really* bad, you had to wait until the gas gauge was close to empty so the two functions could be combined. Sort of the fill up and flush out all at the same time.

I shudder to remember the disruption that a flat tire or a faulty fan belt could cause in our well-planned routine. More than once, I recall my kid sister, mother and I sweating in the sun on the steep grassy shoulder of the Ohio turnpike while my father bent over the engine cursing under his breath. One memorable trip included three flat tires. That year I think he tore up the shirt cardboards at the Texaco station in Breezewood Pennsylvania.

But this precisely planned, tightly coordinated effort lasted only until our hot, dusty car pulled into the sandy drive of our gray clapboard beachfront cottage in Ocean City Maryland. Once the car doors opened and we tumbled out, schedules were scrapped, E.T.A.'s were abandoned, and the next two weeks lay sprawled out in front of us.

Who knew what unscheduled, spontaneous, silly and totally random events lay ahead. I'm not sure I even remember a clock in the cottage. Days would be charted by the sun and meals by our bellys.

* * *

The boxy cottage sat on a narrow spit of sand half way between the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay. It was a rental. The cottage roof was forest green and there were incongruous ornate white wooden Old English letter Ps tacked on the hurricane shutters. The first time we saw it, we dubbed it "the P-Shack." The name stuck. The P-Shack was just a short walk from the ocean and only a slightly longer walk from the bay, where my father, sister and I would "crab." I wasn't much of a fisherman, but crabbing for the Maryland Blue Crab was a sport that even an eight-year-old could master.

August mornings on the shore always dawned hazy and damp, the air heavy with humidity and salt, quickly wilting our carefully pressed shorts and ruffled halters. My father would gather up a roll of twine, a bushel basket, and the long-handled net, and head for the corner market for cut up chicken pieces, the older the better. Then, bait in hand, holding our noses, we hiked through the boggy fields to the Bay, just as the sun made its final push and popped into view above the ocean's horizon. The spreading warmth on our backs was like a heated nudge, propelling us on, as our soggy tennis shoes made rude sucking noises in the marsh.

When we found the "perfect" spot on the bank, my father would search out a half dozen short sticks that he would poke into the marshy bank, spaced about three feet apart. Onto each stick he tied an eight-foot piece of twine, weighted by a piece of the fetid chicken. Then he threw the line out into the water, leaving the line loose so you could see it straighten when an unsuspecting crab began to scuttle away with the bait.

Even at dawn, the heat hung heavy over the bay's glassy surface. My sister and I crouched on our haunches studying the lifeless line, occasionally slapping at the mosquitoes that swarmed along the shore. And motionless, we would wait. The stiller we became, the more the shoreline teemed with life. Swarms of tiny gnats floated past, breaking ranks only to pass over our sweaty bodies. Slithery water snakes wiggled along the shore where the bank met the water, appearing then disappearing as they wove themselves among the reeds. Occasionally, the stick-like head of a turtle poked up a few

yards out from shore, his still, stoic gaze taking in the scene, then disappearing as silently as he had come. A high-pitched insect buzz permeated the silence. Once in a while, we would hear an unexplained gentle splash. Talking was forbidden. You might "scare away the crabs."

Then almost imperceptibly the line began to move out. That was our signal to slowly start pulling in the line to shore with the guileless crab following the bait. When the crab was a foot or two from shore, we lifted the bait toward the surface of the water and as the crab neared the surface my father deftly scooped him in with the net and dumped him into the seaweed-filled bushel basket sitting in the shade. Then we gathered 'round and inspect our catch.

Hard, shiny, spiky creatures, all angles and sharp edges, black-bead eyes perched on protruding antennae, bulging claws clicking and clacking against the basket and each other, with seaweed leaving slimy stripes across their backs. With our blue eyes round and wide, we watched in fascination, sometimes teasing with a stick to watch them snap and grab, as they scrambled to escape.

The crabs were Maryland Blue Crabs, *Callinectes sapides*, "Blues" to the locals. Actually they were more brackish green than blue, although in certain lights one could detect an iridescent cerulean sheen. First, we checked size, because, as my father would remind us with a secretive smile, when it comes to crabbing size *does* matter. It was many years before we understood the implications of his remark. Shell widths ranged

from four inches (my father called those "mini-grubbers" and disdainfully threw them back) to an occasional eight-incher, which always elicited breathless oooo's and ahhh's. "A real *keeper*" he would say.

Then my father would flip it over for a gender check, the crab's sex determined by the shape of the "apron" or shell-overlay on the crab's pale underbelly. The female "apron" is rounded, contoured like a cupcake, while the male version is more phallic-shaped, a word not yet in my vocabulary. To me it was shaped like a Popsicle. Some say the males are better for eating, but my father always preferred the females because of the salty roe they produce. While this may have been titillating stuff for some, for summer shore kids it was just perfunctory foreplay in a summer day that would climax in a steaming pot of crabs.

Then it was back to our appointed stations along the bank.

After a few hours, the sun had risen high enough over the ocean to reach our sheltered cove. Shimmering heat waves rose from the cool banks as the hot sun relentlessly pounded our marshy post. After about nine or ten catches, the novelty of the hunt was wearing thin, and, sweaty and restless, my sister and I began to whine, about the mosquitoes, about the mud, about the heat. The odor of fetid chicken and rotting seaweed filled our nostrils with every breath. My thin, fine hair hung in limp strings. My skinny legs were mud-spotted and dotted with itchy, red bites and scratches. My voice took on a piercing "little girl" edge, every comment ending in a plaintive wail. Finally,

as the sun crept toward its zenith, my father would pack up the crabbing tools and lug the cool, mossy bushel basket back to the cottage to store in the shade for later that afternoon.

Suddenly the hot, blazing sun became our friend as my sister and I ran into the cottage to don our bathing suits for a day of digging in the sand, chasing the churning surf, and eating bologna sandwiches on a sand-sprinkled woolen army blanket. After the endless but mandatory one-hour wait after lunch ("...or you'll get *CRAMPS*") my father took my sister and I out into the deep water where, wrapped in his arms, we bobbed patiently, watching for the swells to develop before their crashing arrival on the beach. If his timing was right, we were lifted high over the swell as it relentlessly rolled to shore. And each time we were lifted, we would all yell "HONKY TONK!" If his timing was off and the breaking of the wave was premature, we were pounded and doused by the rushing surf. But he never let us go. And we always came up laughing as we shook water from our hair and blinked stinging salt from our eyes.

Later we lay spread-eagle on the prickly wool blanket letting the hot sun bake our backs. Sometimes, eyes closed, we would let our tongues make lazy circles around our lips tasting the last tangy vestiges of salt. Then it was another wild run into the roiling waves, always mindful of the dreaded "UNDERTOW" about which we were often warned.

Late in the afternoon, as the sun descended into the bay, we straggled back to the P-Shack, bathing suits sand-filled and salt-crusted, and skin tight from the hours of sun.

After a fresh-water rinse under the outdoor shower, we donned crisp cotton shirts and shorts and gathered in the tiny cottage kitchen to cook the crabs.

My father carried in the bushel basket and ceremoniously placed it on the kitchen floor while my mother put a gigantic white enamel pot of water on the stove. The time it took for the water to reach a boil was only slightly less than infinity. Meanwhile, we could hear the frantic click and clatter of the crabs as they tried to scramble their way out of the basket. *Finally* the water began to roll and it was time to plop them into the pot. My father was in charge. With metal tongs, dented from fierce previous battles I was sure, he firmly moved the crabs from basket to pot. There was a fleeting last minute scramble as they hit the hot water until he quickly covered the pot. I was never sure if he covered it to prevent us from watching them suffer or to abort their last minute escape attempts. The pot-covering was accompanied by a soft but discernable *hisssss* from inside, but my father always said I was making that up.

After 20 minutes of ferocious boiling that filled the cottage with the thick smell of Bay's Seafood Seasoning and boiled fish, they were ready. My father uncovered the pot with a flourish as we leaned over to inspect their new bright orange color. By then pages from the previous day's *Baltimore Sun* covered the battered kitchen table on which my mother had set the small wooden hammers and nut crackers. Our table was ready.

The technique of eating whole crab is a complex one. And it is not for the timid or faint of heart. But no summer shore child is ignorant of its intricacies. Even at age eight, the

slippery sloppy procedure was routine. First you pull off the front claws and set them aside for deferred enjoyment. Then you pull off the rest of the legs, which hold no real meat. Next, you turn the crab on its back. Remember that cupcake/Popsicle shaped "apron"? Simply dig your finger under it and pull it up like the tab-top on a Diet Coke. That will allow you to separate entire crab belly from its back. Now you have taken the top off the treasure chest.

But there is yet another obstacle to the cache. Inside are the lungs, a dozen spongy, gray fingers protecting the meat, called menacingly by my father "devil fingers". Urban/ocean legend has it that they are highly poisonous if eaten, so great care is taken with their removal. And they were often the stuff of which childhood threats were made, as in "I'm gonna make you eat DEVIL FINGERS!!!!" Sometimes inside the body cavity one found a mustard-colored paste which was also carefully scooped out. We never asked. And occasionally, in the female we would find the orange-tinted pearlized eggs that my father found such a delicacy, closing his eyes and smacking his lips as he savored the succulent globes of roe.

Next we picked up the shell with both hands and broke it down the middle. Tucked into each half, beneath a thin, bony translucent crust, were the succulent white chunks of sweet crabmeat, the reward for all our efforts. And then we simply dug it out. Once we secured such a morsel, we dipped it with our fingers into the shallow bowls of melted butter and vinegar which were required elements of the ritual, then stuffed it in our mouths as butter dripped down our chins and arms.

While the wooden mallets were provided for attacking the thick-shelled claws, and metal picks for digging out inaccessible tidbits, the rest was done without aid of tools or silverware. Fingers were greasy and mouths pleasantly burned with the tang of the Bay's seasoning. And my father would take a long swallow of his cold Miller High Life, lean back in his chair, smile broadly, and looking around the table, he would say, "It just doesn't get any better than this."

THE TRIPLE

Ever since I was five, I've wanted to fly on the flying trapeze. On Saturday mornings my little sister and I would wake my father and spend an hour playing circus on my parents' rumpled bed. My father would imitate the sound of a circus calliope and then announce the coming acts. "*Ladies* and *Gentlemen, Good Evening to You...*" We would play Clyde Beatty, Lion Tamer, with my father playing the *most ferocious* tiger. We would play show horse and cling doggedly to his back as he bucked and reared in true show horse fashion. And we would play trapeze by my father lying on his back with his legs straight up and his feet planted on my tummy, where I perched precariously, body stiff, arms out, like some Boeing 747. (Balance was everything, as I nervously struggled to hold the pose even I was only three feet or so above the bed.) I felt like I could fly.

That's how long I've wanted to fly on the flying trapeze. Now, a half a century later, I was about to have my chance.

It was 3:14 a.m., just hours before my trapeze lesson, that I made the connection. I had scheduled the lesson weeks before, when I heard that the travelling trapeze master would be in town at the end of August for a rare one-day seminar on the art of flying. It was a dream I'd nurtured for a half a century and now my chance to make it come true would be just a short drive away. It was a chance of a lifetime. Within minutes I had scheduled my lesson.

But it wasn't until that wakeful period at 3 a.m. prior to my lesson that I remembered "the TRIPLE." My heart beats faster just thinking the words. The Triple. The movie "Trapeze" was a colorful and glamorous behind-the-scenes look at circus life, released in 1956. It starred a very muscular Burt Lancaster as Mike Ribbles, the "old" seasoned trapeze master, injured in a fall, taking on a young, slim, and very handsome Tony Curtis, as Tino Orsni, his protégé. To-date, Lancaster is the only man alive to have mastered the Triple – a mid-air triple somersault between the trapeze swings before reaching the arms of his catcher. Curtis has the Double down pat. All he needs is to perfect that third somersault. As Lancaster tells him: "You're comin' out of that third somersault and you're comin' out like an express train and you're comin' out blind and you got one split second to reach for your catcher and he's got one split second to reach for you. That's all there is to that third somersault."

My father loved that movie and "The Triple" was always said in hushed tones, because it had come to represent the impossible. Or rather the almost-impossible. That ultimate challenge, that yet-to-be-conquered feat, which, when conquered, becomes the ultimate victory. Like Lancaster says: "I knew when I did it I'd have the world in the palm of my hand."

The Triple. I whispered the words softly as I fell fitfully back to sleep

* * *

Several hours later, as I sat through my instruction, I learned the importance of focus in the art of trapeze. Trapeze is about living in the moment, being totally present in the

now. It's about exclusively concentrating on the task ahead, shutting out all distraction. It's about timing and it's about trust. Each swing is new and unique, so the flyer needs to become conscious of the existing reality structures that define and impact his or her performance. I strained to focus as I climbed the 30-foot ladder, self-consciously placing each foot one ahead of the other on the 45 narrow steps. Suddenly I was standing on the platform looking out at the complex spider-web maze of ropes, pulleys and nets.

The movie opens with an overhead wide shot of Lancaster swinging from a trapeze with a partner to the tune of "The Blue Danube Waltz" just before his fateful injury. I was now viewing the trapeze through Burt Lancaster's eyes, my dream spread out below. The only difference was that my Big Top was not a tent but the wide, blue summer sky.

As I listened to my final instructions, I filled my lungs with air, then leaned forward, tightly grabbed the slightly sticky bar of the swing as it swung toward me, and let the momentum of my body pull me out to the center of the netting.

The first pass took my breath away. But there was no time to revel. After my first swing back and forth, I hooked my legs over the bar, let go with my hands, and dangled by my knees. Another near-180 degree swing, this time with the bar tucked firmly behind my knees. Exhilarated, I held my arms out like a Boeing 747. The upcoming catch required my swinging back and forth three times hanging by my knees. Then my catcher, a muscular young trapeze artist swung out from the platform at the other end, met me half-way, and, with perfect precision, grabbed my wrists. The muffled slap of our wrists

locking resonated like a gunshot. It was the perfect catch. We were linked. On our next pass I unhooked my knees and hung from his hands as we flew together the full arc of the swing. Then I let go and, as instructed, did a double backwards summersault into the net. The bleachers full of fliers' supporters erupted in cheers. I'd nailed it.

As I scrambled to the edge of the net, I thanked my catcher. Because it was his immaculate timing, his strong grasp, and his dependability that made me look so good. When I swung off the platform I knew he would be there to catch me and hold me and instruct me. I trusted him. I counted on him. We were a team. As Lancaster told Lollibrigida when she asked to join the act: "Why do you think I like a two-act? One flies. One catches. And no one comes in between."

One flies, one catches.

I posed for a post-fly photo op with my right hand extended in an exaggerated theatrical pose, the world in the palm of my hand.

THE CROQUET GAME

5/19/37 – Yesterday I read H.G. Well's book "The Croquet Player." Tonight I am in bed at nine reading Tiffany Thayer's sexy "13 Men."

A.J. Nagy diary, 1937

"The USCA American rules version of croquet, though no more difficult to master than any other sport, is probably the most misunderstood of them all. Perhaps the biggest reason USCA croquet is still a small sport is that most people can't follow the game at first exposure in the way that one can quickly figure out golf, tennis and bowling. Playing croquet well calls for the kind of physical skills developed in billiards and golf and the tactical thinking of board games like chess and Parcheesi. Although the rules are simple enough – as are the rules of chess – mastering the tactics and strategy require, for most people, diligent practice and study."

Croquet Federation of America

In the fifties, summer Sunday afternoons were a family time. And since my parents were among the first to escape the confines of the small city lot for the sprawl of a suburban backyard, their house became a gathering place for city-dwelling family and friends to eat

grilled hot dogs, drink cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer from a wash tub full of ice, and even take a turn cranking the home made ice cream maker.

The focal point of the afternoon was usually a croquet game involving six to eight family members. These matches were no idyllic, pastoral displays of gentility, sportsmanship, and etiquette. They were contentious, lively, and often loud affairs, as players baited, taunted, and argued their way around the grassy course. Sometimes they were downright ugly. The air resounded with the crack of mallet against wooden ball, especially as one player intentionally strikes (roquets) another player's ball, then maliciously "roquet-croquets" the opposition's ball yards off course and out of competition. Not that there's anything wrong with that. We were a competitive bunch, all playing to win, and if rules allowed a competitive edge, thank you, we'll certainly take advantage. And I would probably still be playing the game today if it weren't for one thing. No, it's not about skill. And it's not about equipment. It's about my father.

You see, my father cheated. Oh, nothing blatant like hitting out of turn, or nudging his ball to a more favorable lie. My father just changed the rules. Arbitrarily. Capriciously. Blatantly. Dishonestly. To serve his needs. His ball didn't quite reach the wicket with the extra shot he got from whacking mine out of the way. In that case, he suddenly earned *two* shots for such a whack. What do you mean you didn't receive two shots when you were in that situation? That's because you were on the *first* half of the course. It only applies when you're on the *second* half. Or some such capricious and preposterous thing.

It's not like no one noticed. This competitive bunch was pretty protective about their turf. And his convenient rule changes did not go unchallenged. Uncle Joe, his brother, always lodged the loudest protests. He would storm up to my dad, waving his wooden mallet in the air, and shouting nose-to-nose, "Whadda ya mean TWO shots?!? None of the rest of us ever got two shots for hitting another player!!! Why YOU...!!!" My father would always hold his ground, citing some complex and ambiguous rule from some apocryphal croquet code that none of us had ever heard of before. And Aunt Rose would hover in the background, trying to quiet the quarreling brothers, shhhh-ing Joe's language "with the little ones around" while Cousin Don stood back laughing until his sides hurt as the dispute escalated. Meanwhile, Cousin Bob, the serious one, would just scowl and shake his head, studying his strategy for the next play. And Grandma would stand silently watching her boys argue, patiently waiting for someone to tell her when it was her turn to hit.

Soon, the other players would join in the fracas, usually opposing my father, who would continue to firmly uphold his mythical croquet covenant. And often, in a bold gesture of confidence he would appeal to the spectators for support. My mother was always non-committal, pleading ignorance of the rules. Others would voice opinions formulated mostly to stir things up more, until the entire backyard was embroiled in the controversy.

What my father may have lacked in croquet ability, he more than made up for in debating skills, and eventually the players would simply give in, accept his incredibly unjust

ruling, and move on, all the while muttering under their breaths, "Goddamn Al. Al's Rules. His backyard. His goddamn rules." And if grown men and women were intimidated and eventually dominated, imagine me, at ten years old, trying mightily to maintain fairness in following what I knew as the rules, and seeing my own father so blatantly and unapologetically breaking them. The unjustness. The oppressiveness. The hypocrisy. Or, as I would usually end up tearfully yelling, "That's not FAIR!!!" before running in the house and slamming my bedroom door so that the whole yard could hear.

I was reminded of these halcyon days last Sunday when my mother, in a moment of nostalgia, pulled out the old croquet cart in preparation for an old-fashioned Memorial Day picnic. And while my father's been gone for several years, and this year's players were all new to the game, I felt that anxious feeling forming in the pit of my stomach. I would not allow exaggerated adolescent memories to interfere with a lovely Sunday social activity. Let the games begin!

Well, we weren't very far into the game when I realized that these Sunday sluggers were novices. They had never played *real* croquet. They were totally ignorant of the finer points of the game, the nuances, the subtle rules, the complex regulations that apply. "Hey you guys, you don't just hit the striped post to finish the game. First you have to return to the course and "kiss" all the other players, then hit the post." Chaos ensues. Voices are raised. A gallery opinion is solicited. More shouting.

And I find that I am holding firm. After all, I know the rules. I learned them from an expert.

THE PERFECT MARTINI

12/8/37 – In the middle of the afternoon, I had my first martini. I pictured myself as sophisticated Melvyn Douglas as I sat at the glittering bar. I was a little woozy and laughed easily all afternoon.

A.J. Nagy, diary, 1937

I'm not sure if my father liked martinis or simply the *idea* of martinis. But, like so many things he foresaw for himself, he was going to be a martini drinker. And he was. His recipe for the perfect martini was a bottle of Bombay gin stored in the freezer.

One of his favorite gin joints was Ginopolis. Ginopolis has been around for years, starting as a small Greek family-run restaurant in downtown Detroit, then moving to an affluent suburb in the late 50s. It has a glittering and well-stocked bar.

Now my father had eaten in bistros and bars all over the world – Budapest, Vienna, Paris, San Francisco, New York and Rome. And no one is quite sure what it was about Ginopolis that kept calling my father back. Perhaps it was the raspy-voiced red-head who served him and laughed so loudly at his jokes. Maybe it was the way the sun filtered hazily through the shutters in the late afternoon. He said it was the barbecued ribs. But I suspect it was the perfect Bombay martinis. Even after his driving days were through, every Wednesday afternoon he would slowly make his way with his walker down the

front sidewalk to wait impatiently for his pal, Bob Phelan, to pick him up for their mid-day mid-week Ginopolis lunch.

* * *

Today as I sat at a red light at the corner of 12 Mile Road and Middlebelt Road, I noticed I was in front of Ginopolis. Suddenly it struck me. GIN-opolis. How come I had never thought of that before? I wished he were here to share that with. He would have laughed like hell.

THE HUNGARIAN

"FIRST YOU STEAL A CHICKEN..."

I've always thought Hungarians were the most exotic people in the world. Perhaps it's because to a child they represented a wild and passionate nature I envied. And besides, many were gypsies. The word alone thrilled me.

I received my first impression of real Hungarian gypsies from the old 78 rpm record albums that my father occasionally played. Sandor Lakotos. Andras Farkás. And Ziggy Bela (who years later would play at my sister's wedding.) As a child of five or six, I would sit on the floor in front of the hi-fi studying the figures on the album covers. With their gold bangle bracelets, their colorful swirling skirts, their low cut peasant blouses, and their bright red lips, they looked so carefree. But I sensed a darkness underneath.

Hungarians wear their hearts on their sleeves. They love madly, they hate fiercely and they hurt deeply, sometimes all within minutes. But there was always room for a little larceny (some call it flim-flam) when the need arose. And as a child I often felt a chill when I heard the apocryphal stories of gypsies coming in the night and stealing everything from chickens to children.

Mixed with the curse of the gypsies was the glamour and excitement associated with many of their notable offspring. Béla Lugósi, Tony Curtis, Joe Namath, George Cukor,

Franz Liszt, Calvin Klein, Houdini, and of course the Gabor sisters, all conjured up romantic images. According to the Associated Press, people of Hungarian ancestry have been nominated for motion picture Oscars 136 times and have taken home 30 of the golden statuettes. But my father was also diligent in sharing with us their more substantive accomplishments. Inventions from the atomic bomb to the zeppelin exist though the efforts of Hungarians. Some 36 Nobel Prize winners, and dozens of Olympic gold medalists, not to mention Joseph Pulitzer, an icon of my industry. By age eight I knew all about them.

One of my father's favorite stories was about Enrico Fermi, the Hungarian Nobel Laureate, who, when asked if he believed in extra-terrestrials, replied: "They are already here. They are called Hungarians!"

My father also shared their history. Hungarians are often called Magyars ("Mud-yars"). It's a word dating back to the fifth century when clans wandering the steppes of Asia mingled with the Turks resulting in these Magyar people. In its original form, the word comes from Mänsiery. *Män'si* means *men*. Late in the ninth century, Hungarian tribes came across Asia to Europe and settled in the Carpathian Basin. Their assimilation was difficult, not only because of the differences between the two continents, but also because the historical development pushed them into the feudal system, forcing them to live differently from their inclinations and abilities.

While over time they have gradually accepted Western culture, traces of the Eastern way of thinking linger, often causing them political, intellectual and emotional conflicts. My father recounted how over the years Asia has continued to reach out to the Hungarians. From nomadic tribes to the Ottoman Empire to the Soviet Union to attacks by Mongols in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, they continue to tug at the Hungarian system and yank it east. He said it was as if they don't want the Hungarians to leave.

Perhaps it's that "push me/pull me" existence that has created the odd Hungarian dichotomy, for the Hungarian character is truly one of opposites. Their gusto for words, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch can barely be contained. Yet there's a hauntingly sad melody of futility that lingers beneath. The Hungarian temperament tends toward a deep-rooted pessimism, punctuated by sudden expressions of a voracious appetite for life. While the mood may temporarily be somber, at any moment the mist of melancholy can be rent by buoyant music and brazen dance.

A writer once said that while the Viennese mind tends to neurosis, the Hungarians' turn to psychosis. They are a people of extremes, with few in-betweens.

Hungarian men are a particular paradox. While they display a deep masculine reserve, it is coupled with a grandiloquence that allows men to openly express their loves, hates, and desires. Hungarian men are known across the continent as suave, sensitive, and debonair.

My father was Hungarian in every sense. He wore his heart on his sleeve. He wept at movies, shed tears at birthdays, and cried when the flag passed by. Yet he is most remembered by his smile. He hugged, he kissed, and he constantly reaffirmed his love to those close to him. But he was also unpredictable. His laughing practical joke-playing life of the party demeanor one day could turn to melancholy the next. It is my most Hungarian trait.

Years later I would learn that Hungary has the highest per capita suicide rate of any civilized nation in the world. And that alcoholism is the country's largest social problem. Teen pregnancy rates are high. And the majority of the country's residents are nicotine-addicted. But, sitting in front of the record player, studying those colorful album covers, there was nothing more captivating, nothing more alluring, than being a Hungarian.

It's often said that being Hungarian is, above all, a state of mind. And when friends and family members punctuate a comment I make, a joke I tell, or a thing I do, with "You're just like your father", I smile. I am just like my father. Hungarian.

Perhaps my father is a state of mind as well.

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"I remember riding the Livernois bus in Detroit with Mother to Western Market on Warren to buy a live chicken and then bringing it home on the bus. Then the cleaning and butchering! Mother would take it out on the back porch and neatly chop its head off

and sometimes it would run around headless for a while until it weakened and died. And I remember operating the sausage-stuffing machine during hog killing time and putting casings over the long opening. And the "teperto" – the squeezed small grease cakes. And the rendering of lard. And always the wonderful smell of simmering stuffed cabbages on a Sunday morning."

Memoirs of Alex Nagy, 1981

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As I learned early on, Hungary has never been noted for its cuisine. While it is said that Alexander Dumas once praised the paprika-laced Magyar dishes, and Edward VII once asked for a Hungarian chef to join his London household staff, Hungarian cuisine has remained somewhat an oxymoron to the outside world. Even in these days of "ethnic chic" there is not one first-class Hungarian restaurant in New York City.

Ahhh, but how I pity those who have never enjoyed the creamy, tangy taste of a well-simmered *paprikash*, or allowed the buttery, crisp, flaky layers of a warm apple strudel to melt in their mouth.

Sadly, with availability so limited, the only way to make such visions a reality is to retreat to the kitchen and cook. And so I did one Saturday morning not long ago. It was the day before the 6th anniversary of my father's death. It would be a posthumous culinary tribute, a mealtime toast to my heritage. So I pulled out my tomato-stained, dog-

eared Hungarian cookbook and began to make a list. This is no glossy Silver Palate or hardcover Julia Child cookbook. It's a 48-page paper cover booklet of treasured Hungarian Recipes published by The Ladies Auxiliary, Branch 18, of the William Penn Fraternal Association, first published in Detroit Michigan some fifty years ago.

I immediately noticed how frugal was the fare. My entertaining, while infrequent, borders on the extravagant. Filet, arugula, artichokes, and kiwi frequently appear on my shopping list. Hungarian ingredients are basic: cabbage, eggs, pork, potatoes, and sour cream. Mushrooms are about exotic as it gets. Or pigs feet (seared and cut in half).

Stuffed cabbage and chicken *paprikash* were my father's favorites. Not coincidentally, they are also my meal of choice.

I inventory my cookware the night before to be sure I have the necessary tools. Spacious mixing bowls, heavy wooden spoons, and several large pots. I get up at 6AM Saturday morning to begin the adventure. The air is still and ice coats the trees outside my windows. We are still tottering between seasons, and I am reminded of other such mornings long ago.

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My father claimed to be part gypsy. And there was something about the changing seasons that brought out the gypsy in him. Perhaps it was a shift in metabolism. Perhaps the change simply energized him. With the annual ritual of The Shepherd's Breakfast we knew winter was on its way.

On a chilly autumn Sunday morning he would rise early and announce that today was the day he would prepare the *Zsir Kenyér*. Pronounced GHEE rosh ken yee, it is politely referred to in English as "Shepherd's Breakfast," but it literally translates as "lard bread." It recalls the days when nomadic Hungarian gypsies spent months out in the foothills with few provisions and no perishable food.

In our house, this event announced the autumn equinox even more officially than the first orange leaves. The morning began with my father turning on the hi-fi, pulling the worn Hungarian record album books out of the cupboard, and carefully removing the heavy black disks. He would blow on each one to remove any offending dust before gently placing it on the turntable. I would sit cross-legged on the floor and let the mercurial folk music envelope me as he began building a fire in the fireplace.

Once the fire was blazing and hot, he would place a hefty chunk of salt pork on a skewer, grilling it until it was hot and sizzling. The room would become heavy with the smell of hot frying bacon. Then he would remove it from the fire and carefully drizzle the drippings over a thick crusty slice of rye bread with caraway seeds, preferably homemade. Atop the soaked bread he would place a thick slice of raw onion and then another slice of bread. And that is a Shepherd's Breakfast.

I always imagined the gypsy women sitting cross-legged around the fire with their voluminous skirts spread around them like Georgia O'Keeffe poppies. And I could easily

picture the men in their colorful embroidered vests, wiping bacon drippings from their thick, black mustaches with the full sleeve of their peasant shirts, as the smell of wood-smoke filled our suburban living room.

For reasons he never shared, my father always chose Sunday mornings for this ritual, and we pitied the poor soul sitting in front of him in church that day who suffered the service in a fog of what we called "Hungarian Breath." But real gypsies were not bothered by such practicalities. Shepherd's Breakfast was a bridge to his past. He was keeping a cultural heritage alive through a sandwich.

During those annual breakfasts, in spite of my fascination with the gypsies, I only nibbled at the edges of the thick crusted sandwich, politely declining to join him in what he enthusiastically called "the feast."

My father has been gone six years now, and every once in a while, on a cold, clear morning, I wake up with a restless urge to sit down in front of the fireplace and share a lard sandwich.

But a larger culinary challenge awaits. Today I will prepare a feast.

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I begin with huge pots of water boiling on the stove, one for cabbage and one for *paprikash* dumplings, which will be individually dropped, teaspoon-full by teaspoon-full into the briny bubbling pot. The cabbage, too, requires personal care. The cabbage is

boiled whole, then each leaf must be carefully lifted from the water as it wilts and separates from the bobbing head. Then the leaves are set aside to drain and cool, waiting their filling of ground pork and rice.

The dumpling dough provides another challenge. Comprised of nothing more than eggs, flour, and salt, the dough is at first a dusty, unwieldy lump, impossible to "beat" as the instructions demand. I am using a simple ceramic bowl just as I remember my grandmother using, and a wooden spoon to turn the lumpy clod. I grip the heavy bowl against my chest and churn the wooden spoon as hard as I can. It takes all my strength to turn the spoon once around the bowl. I grit my teeth. I close my eyes. I am sweating. Slowly the flour-dusted mass begins to soften. The egg begins to permeate the dough, which becomes pliable, then turns to a sticky paste. My work has paid off. With great effort, I have a bowl of pale yellow dumpling dough.

Next the dumplings themselves. To make the perfect dumpling, you must use two teaspoons. First, scoop a dab of dough the size of the tip of your pinkie finger from the bowl. Then, using the second spoon, scrape it off the tip of the spoon and drop it into the boiling pot. The size of the dumplings determines the quality of the *paprikash.* The smaller the dumpling the more esteemed the dish. "The dumplings were too big" is a harsh Hungarian post-*paprikash* rebuke. I start small, studiously scooping the tiniest of dough dabs and dropping them into the pot. But I'm an impatient person (a common Hungarian trait) and the mound of dough is daunting.

My dumplings grow proportionally with my impatience. In addition, I forget that they will double in size as they cook. Soon my well-intentioned dumplings are the size of marshmallows, as I hurriedly finish the task. When they finish their seven-minute dunk, I scoop one out for a taste. My teeth cut into the pale dough. Hot. Not gummy. Firm. Not rubbery. Large. But perfect. I am amazed. I do a little impromptu *czardas* around the kitchen.

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The *Czardas.* That's the first dance I remember when I think of dance. I picture my father dancing with his mother, my grandmother. I remember how tall and proud he stood, back straight, chest out, his hands resting lightly on my grandmother's hips. Actually we don't really *know* they were her hips, since she seemed to lack the normal curves that distinguish the female figure. Age, along with a fat-filled Hungarian diet, had turned her once voluptuous figure to a shape resembling a fireplug. She was short – five foot one would be a gift – making the simile even more appropriate. She wasn't exactly fat – stout seems more accurate – and there was something reassuringly solid about her bulk as we wrapped our arms around her lower body and buried our faces in her faded printed apron.

In that first dance, she was wearing a cotton dress printed with tiny blue and white flowers, and in my memory she was wearing an apron, although perhaps my memories add the apron as a permanent accessory. They danced in someone's finished basement amidst a crowd of friends and relatives. I think it was a wedding reception. Or maybe a

baptism. There were strangers there too. And the ever-present buffet table laden with stuffed cabbages, sauerkraut, goulash, and Hungarian poppy-seed pastries.

The music came from a phonograph, a big wooden box on a table in the corner, spinning heavy, black 78s, many purchased in Budapest and carefully hand-carried to new life in the U.S. The songs were mostly gypsy songs, sad and nostalgic, rendered by victims of love and loss. Songs about sons away at war. Songs about young lovers. Songs that, in typical Hungarian fashion, turn quickly from melancholy to a wild frenzy and back again.

A few years later my father would dance with me, my little patent leather shoes perched precariously on his Size 11 brown leather wingtips. And I remember having no sense of the rhythm or the music, focusing only on my father's confident step.

Then, when I was six, with stars in their eyes, my parents enrolled me in a ballet class. Perhaps they suspected my shy demeanor would fit perfectly with this gentle dance form. Inside I felt gypped. I wanted to tap. Lacking the long slender limbs that ballet seemed to require, I felt my stubby little legs were destined to shuffle-ball-step noisily across that studio floor. I dutifully stayed with ballet until my parents realized the hopelessness of my efforts.

Later my father and I would polka, with him swinging me breathlessly around the dance floor, my feet flying, skimming but barely touching the polished wood. And of course there was the Tango. After that, dance would never be the same.

When I was in high school he even tried to learn the twist. And at college sorority father/daughter dances, he swept my sorority sisters off their collective feet with his elegant and sweeping waltz steps.

As an adult, I became a devotee to amateur dance classes. I plieéd, I time-stepped, I line danced. I installed a mirrored ball in my living room with *two* pin-spot lights. And someday I would love to learn to shimmy. From fox trot to fandango, from mambo to minuet, I love The Dance. And when I dream of my father we are often dancing.

I don't know what it is about dance that enchants me so. I have little natural aptitude, and even less coordination. Perhaps it's the expressive movement. Perhaps it's some subtle sexual acting out. Or maybe it's sheer romance.

Whatever the reason, I've designated in my final wishes that Aaron Copeland's *Saturday Night Waltz* be part of the send off. It's short. It's simple. And it echoes all the sweet nostalgia every Last Dance has ever held. As poet Donald Marquis describes: "oh i should worry and fret/death and I will coquette/there's a dance in the old dame yet."

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I alternately drop dumplings into the rolling water and tightly wrap meat and rice mixture in warm cabbage leaves. My hands and mind are totally engaged. After a while, I notice my motions become automatic, like some long-buried genetic imprint has surfaced and

taken over. I spoon, I stir, I roll the cabbage rolls reflexively. Instinct rules my motions, freeing my mind for other pursuits. I remember my father's mother, an apron covering her, neck to knees, standing at her big white enamel gas stove, going through the same motions I go through now. The same pungent smells filled her kitchen. The same hearty fare steamed in the pots. And I feel a tug. I feel connected to all of the Hungarian women in my history who practiced these rituals, who purveyed the traditions.

I think of the dozens of little towns in the Hungarian hills, where farm wives gathered these modest ingredients and created warm, belly-filling meals for mustachioed men coming in from the fields for their mid-day meal. The paprika is the salt of the dishes, a basic element, a thousand-year-old taste that has not changed since its discovery. The flour and water dumplings are life sustaining. The cabbage transcends generations in its ability to nourish and fill. And I, in my modern condo kitchen with my Jen-Aire range and side-by side refrigerator/freezer, take my place in this long line of women. Hungarian sisters I thought I never knew.

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A classical radio station accompanies my work this day. And suddenly I become aware of the gentle-voiced host announcing a work by Zoltan Kodaly. As he softly chronicles Kodaly's background, I immediately cease work on my project as I sit back and considered the impact of this coincidence.

Zoltan Kodaly was one of Hungary's most revered contemporary composers. He was born in 1882, the son of a railroad conductor. My Hungarian grandfather was also born in 1882. His father was a railroad conductor as well.

Kodaly was born in Kecskemet, a small town in western Hungary. Beregsom, the village where my grandfather was born, was in eastern Hungary, at the opposite end of the rail line.

It is not unimaginable that Kodaly's father and my great grandfather were co-workers, and perhaps even friends. And can you not picture some bitter, bleak November night, as the trains were stopped in some tiny Hungarian town, the two proud beaming new fathers standing on the platform between the cars, puffing on their pipes and proudly discussing their newborn sons? Perhaps Kodaly looked at my grandfather's picture and grunted: "*Szép.*" Handsome. Maybe they shared a swig of schnapps produced from a deep coat pocket.

One handsome Hungarian boy-child would grow up to compose some of Hungary's most lyrical and spirited classical music. The other would follow in his father's footsteps and become a conductor on one of Hungary's crack high-speed passenger trains. That is, until he fathered a child with the daughter of the Head Conductor and was forced to leave the country and flee to America in shame.

I smiled and returned to my work, softly humming Kodaly's *Háry Janos Suite.*

Perhaps I know those Hungarian sisters after all.

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Once the two main courses are safely packed away in the fridge and the kitchen returned to some semblance of order, I roll up my sleeves and prepare for the ultimate culinary challenge. Hungarian apple strudel. From scratch. Since Hungarian cookbooks tend to be infuriatingly vague on details ("add some salt" or "beat until ready") I consulted several versions before picking up the gauntlet. The most daunting aspect of this effort is the dough. Tradition requires that the dough be hand rolled, preferably on a kitchen table that allows the thin, fragile dough to hang over the sides of the table like some edible tablecloth. Stretch, roll, flatten, roll, smooth, roll, always careful that the dough does not dry out during the process. A damp towel assures that the un-worked portions of dough stay moist and pliable. Ideally, the layers ultimately become so thin you can actually make out shadowy shapes through their shiny sheets.

Then you cut the cobwebbed shapes to 12" x 18" sheets and stack them, layer upon layer upon layer, each delicate sheet separated by melted butter and cake crumbs. Once this incredible gossamer pile is complete, you cover it with the damp towel and prepare the filling.

I blend a thick mixture of apples, cinnamon, raisins and walnuts and spread a row of it on the dough. Then I ever-so-carefully roll the heavy but fragile dough-stack to surround the syrupy filling, forming a firm and doughy log. A few artistic scores on the top, then into the oven for the ultimate test. During the next 30 minutes I literally pace, peeking into the oven every five minutes to see if anything even slightly resembles grandma's strudel. Suddenly the top begins to turn a pale golden brown. And the warm cinnamon memories of my childhood fill my kitchen. I grin like a madwoman and once again dance around the kitchen in sheer joy.

I remove the pan from the oven and place it on the counter with the care I would give St. Stephen's Crown.

Dinner is finally complete. Chicken *paprikash* simmers on the stove, awaiting the last minute addition of the dumplings to the pale orange sauce. Cabbage rolls bubble in the stew pot, announcing to all my neighbors that cabbage and sauerkraut are on the *menu du jour*. A sweet/tart cucumber salad marinades in the fridge. A small bowl of plump, warm prunes sits on the counter. And a heavy loaf of unsliced seeded rye bread awaits the sharpened knife.

The last task is to select the appropriate music. Kodaly has set the stage. Now the CD player is loaded with Brahms and Liszt. Before my guests arrive I fill the room with the lush tones of Brahm's *Hungarian Fantastie.* Of all Hungarian tradition, it is the music that most unleashes memory.

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Hungarian music makes me cry. It's like opera. You don't need to understand the words to experience the emotions. And nowhere is the Hungarian emotional dichotomy more apparent than in its music.

Gypsy folk songs are typically played by a gypsy band – two violins and a cimbalom, a dulcimer type instrument struck with muffled hammers. The Hungarian folk song is usually divided into three parts. The *nóta*, the opening strains, are slow and lyrical. They are also painfully, longingly, tragically sad. The violins seem to be physically pulling, stretching, tugging your heart with lyrics of young soldiers far from home crying at night for their mothers, of women aching for young babies, victims of the fever; of men grieving over lovers long dead, of hapless, hopeless non-requited love. Tears flow freely and a talented violinist can make his fiddle sob.

Then suddenly, unpredictably, the mood shifts, and the music becomes wildly happy, a crazy exuberant *csárdás* of colorful flying ribbons and whirling, twirling skirts. Life is sad. Life is short. So let's drink and dance and love and live while we can. Only the most stoic can fail to be caught up in the music's uninhibited gypsy spirit.

Part three is often a brief reprise of the *nóta*, a slow and somber coda, lest we forget our original heartbreak. But it's that burst of fleeting joy and abandon that lingers. To Hungarians, what makes this music so painfully poignant is its reconciliation of

happiness and heartbreak. And that is the contradiction with which all Hungarians live, how to reconcile happiness and heartbreak in life's continuing dance.

Because my father was an offspring of first generation Hungarians, his Hungarian cultural heritage was strong. He spoke the language, he ate the food, and, most passionately of all, he embraced the music. In his childhood, he had learned the words to dozens of Hungarian folk songs, many dating back more than a century. And whenever he ate in a Hungarian restaurant that had a gypsy trio, he would keep them busy with requests of the old Hungarian songs, turning trio to quartet as his strong tenor voice led the way. The musicians loved him, not only because of his quiet palming of ten dollar bills to keep them playing, but because he knew the old songs and he knew the words. No requests for "Golden Earrings" or "Strangers in the Night." His music was the music of their childhood, their heritage and of their hearts.

One hot August evening in 1986, my family was dining in a traditional Hungarian restaurant along the banks of the Danube in Budapest. From our table we could see the twinkling lights that line the riverfront and the sparkling Chain Bridge connecting Buda with Pest in the distance. The *Székely Gulyás* had been spicy and filling, the homemade bread crusty and course, and the strudel flaky and warm. And as we drank our thick, black coffee and savored our wine, three weathered, wrinkled, mustachioed gypsy violinists approached our table. My father immediately made a request in Hungarian and as soon as the first sorrowful strains of the violin pierced the air he began to sing. His soulful voice filled the old cavernous, wood-beamed restaurant.

The musicians were astounded. Not only had he requested an obscure old peasant song, but his Hungarian was an archaic variety not spoken since the turn of the century. The language he had learned was an antiquated version of Hungarian, not polluted by idioms, colloquialisms, or slang. It was a Hungarian these musicians had not heard since their grandparents were alive. It would be the equivalent of walking into a TGIFridays and asking, "What thinkest thou of the roasted beast this eve?" It was instant bonding. The musicians remained at our table for the rest of the night, trying to stump my father with obscure selections and celebrating in song at the ones he recognized, which were most of them.

I can still picture my father, eyes closed, head back, soulfully interpreting those doleful lyrics, with the musicians circling him providing a passionate accompaniment. For hours they played and sang, and when it was time for us to leave they begged us in their broken English to "Stay, good peoples, stay."

It was late. The restaurant was closing. But as we walked to the door the musicians followed us, continuing to fervently play and sing the songs by now they knew were his favorites. They followed us out the door and onto the Danube promenade, and as we walked to our hotel they continued to follow, still ardently playing, with my father still singing along, like some ethnic Pied Piper with gypsies in his wake.

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The friends I have chosen to share this meal are not Hungarian. One is German and one a Scot. But they are adventuresome diners and mindful of the emotion I've put into this culinary tribute. It's selfish of me, but I've chosen them because I know they will be kind.

The table is covered with my best black linen. Magenta napkins lay like exclamation points punctuating each place setting. And purple tulips gracefully arc in their own directions in a pink glass vase. The table is set for four. My two friends and me – and my father. I light two purple tapers, dim the lights, and take a deep breath.

I pour four glasses of *Egre Bekover*, "Bull's Blood," a bold, mellow red Hungarian table wine. We raise our glasses.

Apámnak. For my father.

ST. STEPHEN'S CROWN

Hungarian National Museum

Budapest, 8/89

Inside, flying buttress spans a resting place for kings.

Whispers haunt the sacred halls

A hundred jewels

A thousand years

A million dreams

A country's saint

While outside *Magyars* laugh and weep

And dance the *czardas* in the streets.

Inside, sentinels guard the velvet nest

Sojourners shuffle 'round the crown

A hundred steps

A thousand prayers

A million souls

A country's prize

While outside *Magyars* sing and dance

And swill warm *Bull's Blood* in the streets.

Inside, small hands reach to touch the gleaming toque

Whistles shriek against stone walls

A hundred guards

A thousand shouts

A million fears

A country's child

A gleam reflects from cock-eyed cross

Dance, Gypsy, dance.

THE ROMANTIC DIARIST

"Many smiles are written on the pages – many heartaches are sticking their barbs through the broken words."

A.J. Nagy diary, 1937

The year 1937 saw the destruction of the Hindenburg, the disappearance of Amelia Earhart, and the demise of Edith Wharton. Thomas Wolfe was on his deathbed. Joseph Epstein was born. So was Thomas Pynchon. It was the year my father chronicled a year of his life. He was 18 years old.

His diary spanned January 1st to December 31st. No one knows why he chose 1937. There are no journals preceding it, nor any records that indicate its continuation. There were sporadic journal entries written between 1941 and 1944 when he served in the South Pacific during World War II. And later in life, as a frequent traveler, he periodically documented his travels to Paris, Nice, Budapest, Helsinki, Stockholm, Leningrad and Moscow. But the question "Why 1937?" remains unanswered.

In *A Book of One's Own,* Thomas Mallon described a diary as "an instrument of the ego," with the diarist's fundamental impulse "the cheating of death." "[The diarist] knows he will eventually be run to earth," says Mallon, "but his hope is that his book will let each day live beyond its midnight, let it continue somewhere outside its place in a finite row of falling dominoes."

My father's diary suggests he was at a crossroads that year, facing decisions that would dramatically affect his future. Perhaps he felt compelled to "let each day live beyond midnight," to somehow immortalize this critical time. Or maybe the diary was simply a thoughtful Christmas gift from some well-meaning relative in 1936, a gift he felt duty-bound to use. He was like that, my father.

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My father's parents, Joseph Sr. and Elizebeth, had arrived in the U.S. from Budapest in 1914 on the day Germany declared war on Great Britain. They were accompanied by their two children, Elizabeth, 6, and Joseph Jr., 4. My father, Alex, was born four years later. Joseph Sr. worked in the coal mines in Ohio and Kentucky before moving his family to Detroit in 1924 to seek work in the auto plants.

In January of 1937, my father had been out of high school six months. He was the last of the three siblings living at home. An all A student and president of his senior class, he couldn't afford to go away to school. Instead he attended night school while working in the engineering department at General Motors. He enjoyed a busy social life filled with family, sports, movies, and friends. And much romance, both real and imagined. He spent heavily on clothes. He bought dozens of books. He saw scores of movies. And he did it by carefully budgeting his $39.60 a week salary, which he dutifully recorded in the back of the diary. His first weekly accounting entry was always between $10 to $25, faithfully marked "Mother."

Now the diary. As a book, it's unremarkable. It's approximately 3 ½ inches by 6 inches, perfect for a suit coat inside pocket. The cover is soft, a pebbled black vinyl -- or "faux leather" as it was probably advertised. Faded gold letters on the front announce "The Daily Universal Diary." The binding is tightly stitched, which has allowed the book to survive more than 60 years with all its pages intact. Inside the front cover, my father has lettered "Property of Alex Nagy" in his distinctive calligrapher's hand.

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Oh I got up and went to work
and worked and came back home
and ate and talked and went to sleep.
Then I got up and went to work
and worked and came back home
from work and ate and slept.

Alan Dugan

* * *

I am not a journal keeper. It's not that I lack the discipline. My thoughts often come too fast and fragmented to try and capture on a page. The only journals I've ever kept are on my travels. Whether its a week-end in Saugatuck or a month in southeast Asia, somewhere I have a spiral notebook, a hotel note pad, or a leather-bound book filled with tightly written notes. Their titles read like a Michelin directory: Dateline, Singapore. Dateline Budapest. Dateline Paris. Twice I've been required to keep journals for writing classes, most recently a poetry journal. And I once kept a 300 page single-spaced

chronicle of health problems, convinced that my survivors could use it as evidence in court. That's the extent of my journal writing.

Nor am I much of a journal reader. I'm the first to admit that the reading of someone else's journal often has an anesthetizing effect, even when you know the journalist personally. It's like someone once lamented, "Ye Gods...How many times can someone have *breakfast?"*

Now a word about audience. Thomas Mallon says that "no one ever kept a diary for just himself." I believe that's true. Yet regardless of whom we're consciously writing for, the exercise itself almost commands unconscious revelation, for, no matter how tightly the content is regulated, the real person ultimately seeps out onto the page, leaving their indelible stain. My father's diary reveals such truths. So I returned to my own sporadic journals to look for similar revelations. I'm stunned by the results.

* * *

His journal begins abruptly, as if we'd just finished an account of the day before.

If Sonja Henie was "One in a Million" in the movie, she was one of a million in my father's heart. His infatuations changed as frequently as the movie marquees. The price of a movie ticket was 25 cents and in 1937 he saw more than 134 of them. (Remember, it was the era of the double feature.) That doesn't include the numerous Hungarian language films that he saw with his parents. And, like any worthy diarist, he conscientiously documented every film title, male star, female co-star, and theater, along

with a one-line review. It is also telling that on 1/20/37, while he ignores Franklin Roosevelt's Inauguration, he does write that he:

...saw Charlie Ruggles & Mary Boland & Adolph Menjou in "Wives never Know." Menjou says, "Ah my love, pacify your turbulent fears! Your feminine pulchritude is the atom of love."

(I imagine he loved the sound of "pulchritude." *"Learn words, fellow! Have an extensive vocabulary."* He frequently had women look at him "concupiscently.")

I share his love of movies, as well as his love of words. The first movie I remember was "Bambi." I must have been four years old. He took me to see it at the Tower, one of the theatres he records in his diary. And from that day forward I was hooked, frequently losing myself in the alternative reality of the celluloid world.

> Saturday 4/9/99 Saw a FABULOUS art film today. *Total Eclipse* – the story of Verlaine and Rimbaud. God what destructiveness. And passion. And what years of wasted talent. I had no idea Rimbaud was only 16 when he wrote some of his best work and become involved with Verlaine. I had much more sympathy for Rimbaud, who appeared simply mad, as opposed to Verlaine, who was so cruel, self-destructive and demented. When it was over, I looked up the poems of both, but I think my old World

Poetry Anthology has sanitized the selections a bit. Rimbaud's passion for life was simply breath-taking. I want to read more.

Although his profession was engineering, my father always saw himself as something of an artist, a dilettante, an aesthete, always looking for that outlet that would satisfy his creative bent.

2/11 – Perhaps I could be quite an artist if I encouraged my meager talents.

3/3 – I was just telling Mother that I wish I could play some instrument. I feel music in my soul but have no way of expressing it.

7/14 - ...Jake & Sis spent the evening here. I showed them my Delco drawings. Very pleased! I am an artist!

Of course, he wasn't the only one:

Jekyll Island 5/25/84–After this incredible week in my isolated little beach villa, I decide, or maybe I've always felt, that THIS is what I was meant to do, stride tanned and healthy along a beach and into adventure, even if it's alone. And suddenly the answer comes to me! I want to be a travel writer! It's so perfect I whoop out loud and stop in my sandy tracks.

Frankfurt, 7/29/87 Looking out the train window I see the loveliest sight – a Grandma wrapped in a black fringed shawl is standing on the platform with a basket filled with red gladioli. The sun from the station skylight falls on them and makes them glow. I think I should be a photographer. Or a painter.

* * *

There's a story in my family that by the time I was three years old I had memorized every single nursery rhyme in my giant *Mother Goose* book, and when company came I would sit in my little rocking chair, reciting the rhymes as I turned the appropriate page. Visitors were always stunned, since it clearly looked like I was reading. But it wasn't long afterward that I really was reading, avidly, joyfully. I still am. I love books.

So did my father. After a breakfast of leftover *toltöt káposta* (stuffed cabbage), his Sundays were often spent *"reading, radioing and culturing."* His diary is well-seasoned with titles like *Candide, Lost Horizon, The Croquet Player, 13 Men, The Sentimentalist,* and *The Cloister and the Hearth.*

4/30 – I bought the first set of Encyclopaedia today. The DeLuxe edition. I shall buy the rest. It is an excellent buy.

5/28 – I got paid today and went on a spending splurge. I bought three books. Roget's Thesaurus, Crabb's English Synonyms, and Edward's Quotations. I also bought three encyclopaedia.

9/20 – Bought and began Boccaccio.

KALISPELL MONTANA, 10/15/90 –I love this cowboy town! The predictable Kalispell Bar. The unexpected Kalispell Athletic Club. I can't wait to get to a bookstore!

While my father was an ambitious seeker of knowledge, he was at the same time the world's biggest dreamer. Of travel...

2/8 I would so like to travel! I dream a lot. Of far-off places. Morocco, Tibet, Sherwood Forest, Tangier, Florence, Rome.

And I?

FRANKFURT 7/27/87 The Monopol Hotel in Frankfurt is WONDERFUL!!!. I'm sitting in my room at a desk that must be 100 years old drinking a Römer Pilsner, convinced that I am the luckiest woman in the world. The hotel is a delightful mix of art deco and antiques and my little ice box well-stocked with juices and beer. And although I'm not tired at all – exhilarated in fact –that fat down comforter on the single bed beckons...

VIENNA 7/31/87 Indescribable. Waking to church bells outside my window. The hard rolls and cheese breakfast, the bright sun, the buggy

ride through cobbled streets of the old city and around the Imperial Palace. Then getting lost in the late afternoon and stumbling into the garden courtyard of the house where Franz Liszt lived.

HUNGARY 8/10/87 Just a few miles outside Budapest. Cobblestone streets. Horse drawn hay wagons driven by tanned and weathered Hungarian farmers. Women in babushkas, aprons, and long black dresses with cotton stockings. There are dozens of old churches and outdoor cafes serving hot, thick *goulash* soups. I feel like I'm home.

He dreamed of happiness:

2/18 – Visited Uncle Ference tonight. He looked so enviable in his silk dressing gown and pipe –oh for the life of a gay bachelor! What I long and hope for as I sit writing this, wrapped in the charms of "The Blue Danube Waltz," is success, happy success after a happy bachelorhood – then a lovely romance...I wouldn't want worry along with my success. I want to smoke my pipe and dream as I grow old – just a desert isle and sunshine.

VIRGIN ISLANDS, 1/16/81 –We approach Tortolla from the back side of the island. It's a quiet cove and the water is turquoise and calm. The crescent beach is ringed with white sand against a backdrop of palms. Midpoint in the crescent, tucked away about 50 feet back from the beach

is a weathered wooden shack with a counter. A huge Black woman smiles from behind it. She sells fresh lobster sandwiches and Heineken beer. Nothing more. The bread is coarse and white, thickly sliced and slathered with butter. Her young son sits on the ground behind the shack cracking and cleaning lobsters. Our lunches cost four dollars. Later I walk on the beach in the rain. I wash off the sand in a tub with sandalwood soap. I have a view of the water from my bed. At night I see the lighted cruise ships passing. And I wake at 3AM to watch lightening over the ocean.

He dreamed of Paris:

6/14 – Dog-gone! But that "Seventh Heaven" has got me! I wake up every morning with the "Diane" waltz humming in my ears. I want to look out my window & see Paris stretching out before me (the Montmartre district) – with the Eiffel Tower in the distance and big cumulous clouds. With streaming shafts of sunlight and most important Simone Simon, my "Diane", beside me soft and warm...

12/16 – I took "La Tulipe Noire" to work with me this morning. Yesterday Paul took me in to Mr. Nagle's office with my fine translation of the radio letter from Bordeaux France. I now have quite a reputation for French!

Paris 8/26/94

I'm sitting at an outdoor bistro on the corner of Avenue St. Jacque and Saint Germaine drinking *une bière* and watching the parade of Parisians and traffic. I'm alone. And there's something romantic about it. I think of that old movie chestnut *Arch de Triomphe,* with the two clandestine lovers always meeting in shadowy bistros on rainy days, drinking Calvados out of brandy snifters while never taking off their trench coats. Later I walk past Harry's Bar at number 5 rue Daunou. There's a sign over the door that says "*C'est tres gentil d'etre venu.*" It's where Hemingway and Fitzgerald sat drinking Bloody Mary's and talking of writing. My French is improving. *Mon Dieu...*

My father also dreamed of romance: With Effie, Ann, Emma, Helen, Ingrid, Ruthie, Arlene, Julia, Gloria, Phyllis, Leann, Dorothy, Claire, Lizzie, Trudy, Simone Simon, and Sonja Henie, along with legions of anonymous "goddesses" discovered daily:

6/8 – Isn't it strange how clouds of girls come and go in my life and every month brings a new infatuation? After church services I glanced around and my eyes clashed and clung with those of a beautiful angel whose godly visage I have seen somewhere before. She smiled and looked down while I muttered something incoherently– then my heart stood still. I will see her again – soon.

I dreamed of it too.

Saturday 10/10/98

What a Cinderella night. Black tie dinner at the Ritz Carleton. A perfect sparkly long black dress. Surrounded by a sea of handsome tuxedoed men. So elegant. So many compliments. Such romance. Who would ever have imagined I could feel so at ease?

J. Looked stunning. Took my breath away.

And we both went out of our way to dress the part.

6/4 - ...I had on my dark brown suit, no vest, clean new white belt, chocolate brown shirt, white tie with red polka-dots and tanned skin – boy! I was hot!

1/1/98 -Clear blue sky, below zero, snow. Perfect New Year's Day. I wear a white angora sweater and black velvet slacks. Fur coat and muffler. Soft clothes. Mittened hands stuffed in pockets, coats buttoned tight. Cheeks pink. Faces stiff with cold. Premier of *Evita*. I receive looks!

* * *

Occasionally he paused to access his progress, as on his 19th birthday:

5/15 – A gala day! 19 years ago this morning a very good-looking, shy, personality + young man was born – my birthday...it was 13 years ago this morning that we arrived in Detroit fresh from the coalfields of Kentucky. How much water has flowed under the bridge since that time – and what changes have transpired! God how I would like to

relive a few of those happy years! I'm now entering upon a new era of life – still shallow & inclined to be flighty but definitely showing signs of growing up. Good luck on the rest of the journey. Happy returns.

Then there is me on my 54th:

> 11/14/98 -- Spent an hour under the kitchen sink fixing plumbing. Called electrician for work on bathroom light. Found checkbook. Challenged Blue Cross on an unpaid bill. I can do this. I am Woman.. Meanwhile, a party for 25 wonderful wacky women who are important to me. Such times! The house sparkled, food was fabulous, flowers in every room. And such incredible friends. Thoughtful cards, lovely gifts. A winter-white shawl with white satin ribbons. And a plastic tiara because I "add such class and elegance to our friendships." It was amazing. I am living the life I wanted to lead. How cool.

* * *

But on his journey toward self-discovery, he occasionally encountered moments of self-reflection, worry, indecision, and doubt:

7/6 – Exactly one year ago this morning I trudged off to my first day of work. How much I have changed in one brief year! No longer am I a flighty schoolboy with "threshold of life" ideas about the world. More serious now and much more cynical. But I'm laxing in my culture study... What is ahead – 50 years (?)

And so did I:

12/94 – I've metered and kilo-ed and centigraded. I've converted currency and electricity. I've flown, taxied, trained and bussed and boated. And walked. I've covered thousands of miles and thousands of years. I've heard more languages, learned more customs, and seen more native dress than ever before in my life. And what have I learned from all this?

SEVEN THINGS I LEARNED IN SOUTHEAST ASIA:

1. I'd lost my perspective. "The World is Too Much With Us Late and Soon."
2. The world is big,, and although I'm capable and strong, I'm still small, still not sure where I fit in.
3. I will keep traveling. A Gypsy. No home. Wandering the earth. (Looking for an honest man, perhaps? Hahaha)
4. I love the ocean.
5. Sometimes I'm too controlling. Must learn to let go.
6. I know so much more than I did a month ago. It's just that I don't know yet what I know.
7. I know I'm not afraid.

* * *

Then there were our fathers:

11/12 – Father and I had a rather violent discussion of the threat of a future war. Rather violent because I left him in a huff. Poor man – I don't know how he spent the evening alone.

Budapest, Saturday PM

By the way, had the most marvelous talk with dad at dinner about his family and their Hungarian history. I'm so aware of my roots and that I have "people" here. It's not a particularly glorious past, but we certainly are an independent and romantic breed!

* * *

While known for his gregariousness, my father liked to be alone. Perhaps in solitude there is always the possibility of romance.

7/24 – Got a secret thrill walking through the movie theatre for a single seat. A beautiful goddess sat down next to me and I could see there was no seat for her female companion. They had to sit apart! I asked if she wanted me to move. She said "no thanks" but I was very gallant and did so anyway. My reward was a beautiful smile as I left. Ah! At Cunninghams another goddess with a homely bloke. Good gosh! Luck?

WHITEFISH Montana, 10/18/90 - I'm sitting in a Mexican Restaurant near the train station in Whitefish Montana. My table is in an atrium decorated with pink and purple petunias. It's in a corner looking out onto the empty street. The restaurant is called "Dos Amigos." Tonight it's only "Uno

Amigo" since I'm the only person in the place. But the sun is just pouring in and the food smells wonderful and the whole thing is somehow both nostalgic and romantic. At dinner I heard about another woman who is traveling alone throughout Montana. I wish I could find her. It's like the old days in the West. Stopping in a strange town and hearing that another rider had passed through town the day before. "Y'all not travelin' ALONE?!?" I hear it everywhere.

But by far his most frequent entries and efforts show him hell-bent on self-improvement, efforts that ranged from copying Edward the Eight's abdication speech to reading W.J. Cameron's speeches aloud.

4 29 – A <u>real</u> Spring day and again I feel the urge of education within me and hear the call of culture beckoning me to come to her touch. I paid a visit to Uncle's. We had a dandy chat. An evening's college education on life, success, anecdotes, and jokes. His company really made me realize the value of culture, manners, taste, education, and wit.

1/25/99

Am reading poetry every night. From anthologies. From *The New Yorker.* From individual authors. From poetry journals. Sometimes inspiring, sometimes beautiful, but always interesting. But I keep returning to Raymond Carver. Do we all have one poet with whom we bond, with whom our spirits blend? The one whose words just give that kick in the

chest, the thump of the heart, or the lump in the throat? I'll continue to search. But so far only Carver makes me feel "beloved of the earth."

And he remained determined to go away to college.

2/15 – Wrote a long letter to Julia tonight telling her of my plans to go away to college this fall. I must & I will! ...I must study at home three nights a week!

2/17 – I'm afraid I'm appearing listless on my job...It's really the prospect of going away to college this fall. I'm going to buckle down! I will go away to school next year. I will go. I will save.

...words echoed in 1995 when I decided to return to school for a Master's Degree.

* * *

My father had a practical mind and a passionate heart, and an ability to combine them both:

2/28/37 – Driving slowly home – a lovely sunset – listening to Yehudi Menuhin playing Brahms.

11/22/98 - Spend the day at J.'s today. A lovely Sunday, sitting on the couch late afternoon, not talking, just watching the light fade, listening to Saint Saëns Organ Concerto. I love this time of day. There's this "certain

slant of light" that exists for just a few minutes, like we're balanced on some precarious tightrope that divides day and night -Dickinson perhaps?

My engineer father had a poet's soul. Recently I was given dozens of poems he wrote to my mother while he was in the South Pacific during World War II. With titles like "Remembrance," "In My Loneliness," and "With You," they are romantic expressions of longing and love. He even tried his hand at sonnets. They are dedicated "To Ingrid" except for one. "No Better Words" is dedicated to me on my christening, May 22, 1945. All the poems are neatly typed on thin parchment paper with two or three copies. Several of the copies are marked "To Yank," the serviceman's newsletter. My father wanted to be published. I know just how he feels.

1/18/99

Assignment was to write a poem about a museum piece. Remembered when we saw St. Stephen's Crown at National Museum in Budapest. 990 AD! It took my breath away. Like going to Mecca. I chose the Crown for my poem. I invented the form. I used a refrain. And I combined politics with culture. And THEN I re-wrote it in the style of W.H. Auden! Frankly, I preferred my own version.

4/12 – It was such a beautiful day today – a typical Spring morning. I read and re-thrilled with Wordsworth and Shelley, the thoughts that prompted them to write their odes and cantos.

5/2 – Warm sunshine and soft warm winds. Lost myself in an entrancing lethargy of gems in English poetry. I couldn't pull myself out of it. The beautiful sunshiny morning made me recite Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" and Wordsworth's "I wander'd lonely as a cloud."

09/18/98 I'm learning there's a physical part to writing. There are certain lines I can *feel*. "And let your body sing." "I celebrate myself..." "Glory be to God for dappled things." "Love is not all; it is not meat or drink." And my recent discovery "Red Gladiola" by Jeanne Marie Beaumont. Who the hell's Neruda anyway? Must locate.

4/25/99 I have found a new favorite poem. It goes way beyond "To His Coy Mistress" and Dickinson's "Butterflies from San Domingo. It's Pablo Neruda and is untitled. "If I die, survive me with such sheer force..." What power. What perfect serendipity that I would discover it the last week of poetry class. And can you believe that seven months ago I asked 'Who the hell is Neruda?!?'"

* * *

We also shared a desire to mingle with those Cole Porter, George Gershwin uptown swells, those top-hatted sophisticates who dance like Fred Astaire, croon like Rudy Vallee, look like Richard Powell, and make love like Adolph Menjou. A playboy. A *boulevardier*.. A Man About Town. An international *bon vivant.*

1/29 – What a thrill to wear formal evening clothes. I'm so perfectly at ease...

> QEII 05/22/84 - Tonight was the Captain's Dinner, where he joined us at our table and graced us with his company. Quite full of himself he was. But charming and witty just the same. I wore my black lace skirt with the white lace top. And my fabulous rhinestone earrings. I so love dressing up. I felt like Cinderella.

Of course there were the cocktails:

12/8 – In the middle of the afternoon, I had my first martini. I pictured myself as sophisticated Melvyn Douglas as I sat at the glittering bar. I was a little woozy and laughed easily all afternoon.

> QEII 05/24/84--I love the sound of the champagne corks popping. Michael, my dinner companion, leaned over and whispered, 'The sound of a Mumm's cork popping is softer than the sound of a woman's sigh.' The old roué.

And then there was the dance:

11/6 – Came home – shopped for Mother – ate – practiced tango steps.

QE II, 05/21/84 –At four o'clock every day Michael, my dinner companion, and I go down to the salon and watch the daily ballroom dance lessons while having tea and scones and clotted cream. After the lesson, the handsome Italian dance instructor invites me to join him and he "tangos" me from one end of the floor to the other. Oh my...

Saturday 12/5/98

Bought the musical score from *Meet Joe Black*. Play it over and over while I decorated the Christmas tree. I picture the scene where Anthony Hopkins and his daughter dance their last dance to "Wonderful World." Then I do something absolutely nutty. I dance with my father. Really dance. All over the living room in front of the tree. It was lovely. I danced with my father.

* * *

It was **08/16/96.** The day my best friend died. I got the call at 4:30 a.m. A relief in a way. The past few days, months, years actually, had been agonizing. It was finally over. The day dawned sunny and clear. I wanted to take the day off, go play in a park, or sit on my porch and look out at the woods. But I had a press conference to manage at City Hall for a group of Black ministers raising money for burned out churches in the South. I wore a bright sunshine-yellow jacket. As I stood in the back of the room I noticed the ministers talking and pointing at me. I assumed it was work-related.

After the press conference I rode the elevator downstairs with them. One asked how I was doin' today. I said well I'd lost my best friend that day and...suddenly the elevator door opened at their floor, they exited, and we didn't finish the conversation. I felt SO badly because I wanted him to know that in spite of Diane's death I felt grateful and blessed and relieved and...I had to tell him. So I back-tracked to his floor and chased him down. As soon as he saw me he took my hands and looked deeply into my eyes, as I breathlessly told him the rest.

Then he smiled and told me that before the press conference he and his associates had all seen an AURA surrounding me, a soft, glowing light as I stood at the back of the room. They had wondered what it meant. Now they knew. When I got back to my office a Monarch butterfly landed for a moment on my window, then flew away...

* * *

As the year-end approaches, my father summarizes the role that this diary played in his life this year:

His diary ends much like it began, *"pretty much the same as any other day with a routine awakening, breakfast, bus ride..."* The only thing that distinguishes it is *"the gay New Years Eve party held out at Sis's that lasted all night."*

"HAPPY NEW YEAR."

And so ends 1937.

* * *

The next two years, while undocumented, would not be unlike the one just completed. My father would take more night school classes. He would see more movies. He would read more books. He would play football and baseball and tennis. He would develop a reputation as a hockey player with professional potential. And he would fall in love another dozen times. It wouldn't be for another two years, when his name would be among the first drawn in the Selective Service Lottery, that the course of his life would dramatically change. He used to say it was the only lottery he ever won. He would vacation in Havana before he shipped out. He would finish college when he returned. And in between he would marry my mother and father me.

* * *

So what did I learn? I learned how Alex Nagy lived his days. I saw what he ate, how he played, and whom he loved. I saw family members decades gone. I saw my grandfather making Hungarian wine in the basement while struggling with the black lung disease that would eventually kill him. I saw my father teaching English to my immigrant grandparents. I saw his past. I saw my heritage.

I saw the city where I was born in a way I barely remember. Olympia, Rouge Park, Demerys, Belle Isle, Jefferson Beach, and West Grand Boulevard (or "*ze bouleevard*" as my father playfully described it). The Hollywood Movie Theatre, the Riviera, the Tower, the Rex. The Annex, the Globe, and the Fox. Hupmobiles, Kinsels, Vernors, the Kern Block. And Delray, the Hungarian enclave. Pay phones on the corner. Streetcars in the

streets. All against a backdrop of Roosevelt, Edward the VIII, Neville Chamberlain, Francisco Franco, Amelia Earhart, and the Hindenburg crash.

I also saw my father, the man. His vanity. His insecurities. His devotion to his family. His love of beautiful women. His thirst for knowledge. His poetic soul. His athleticism. His craving for culture. His generosity. His lyrical moments of joy. And his ever-present awareness of the temporality of it all.

* * *

When my family traveled together to Budapest in 1987, we had a Hungarian cab driver named Stephen whom I adored, in spite of the huge language barrier. His little sticky notes stuck to the dashboard each morning, his proposals of marriage, his bitterness toward the Communists, and his obvious adoration of my father endeared him to me. Not an hour into the first day he observed I'm "sure a *cheep* off da old block." And we didn't even speak the same language.

I've always known I was a "*cheep* off the da old block." The diary just reinforced it. His love of books. His infatuation with Paris. His wanderlust. His sun worshipping. His passion for movies. His songs in the morning. His mercurial moods. His lousy French. They all provide a *context,* a confirmation that I am indeed a continuation of all those things. "World without End..."

But most of all I realized that, not only did *my father* become the man he wanted to be, so did I.

So what will I do with all this? Perhaps I'll read Tennyson's "Locksley Hall." I'll find the film "Seventh Heaven." I'll plan trips to Venice and Morocco, and maybe even Tibet. And I'll track down a photo of Sonja Henie.

I'll make stuffed cabbage and eat them for breakfast. I'll buy a recording of Yehudi Menuhin playing Brahms. I'll re-read *Lost Horizons.*

And I'll sing more in the mornings.

FREEFALL

THE SINGING

singing each morning out of the night

my father moved through depths of height."

e.e. cummings, 1940

1/22/37 – Attended the concert of the Budapest University chorus which was very beautiful. I am a soulful person – music thrills me a great deal.

9/21 – I was so sleepy that the first thing I asked Mother was if Dad was up yet so I could sing. That is my method of fully awaking – wake up & sing!

A.J. Nagy diary, 1937

My father was not a gifted musician. He learned the harmonica as a child and could play "Down in the Valley" and "Oh Susannah" by ear. He bought a banjo and took lessons until he was able to strum and pluck a few recognizable tunes. But oh my he could sing. He had a clear, pure tenor voice that one might describe as an "Irish tenor" at the risk of offending this ethnic sensibility. And he seemed to know the words to every song ever

written. At an early age I did too. By age six, I knew 14 verses of "Clementine. By the time I was eight, we were doing close harmony on "You are My Sunshine." And I'm certain I was the only kid in fourth grade who knew the words to every World War I song ever written, verses *and* chorus. "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag," "It's a Long Way to Tipperary," and "Bye Bye Blackbird" were part of my repertoire long before more traditionally age-appropriate tunes. I even knew what they meant. When we sang the line in "Pack up Your Troubles" that went "While you've a lucifer to light your fag..." I knew that a lucifer was a match and a fag was a cigarette. And he gave "Give My Regards to Broadway" a hammy, schmalzy treatment that George M. Cohan only dreamed of. It was nostalgia, it was togetherness, it was fun. Until I turned twelve.

My father's desire to sing was not just a private thing. Anytime more than a half dozen friends or family members were gathered together, which happened frequently in our hospitable home, my father would wait for a lull in the conversation. Then suddenly out of the blue he would begin to sing/speak the verse of some well-known chestnut of a song. Fortunately for him, most people do not recognize the verses of many of those oldies, so he would own the solo until the chorus, at which time everyone would join in. This was the heyday of Mitch Miller's "Sing-Alongs" and he had no stronger rival than my father.

Meanwhile, my mother, more a chorus kind of person, supplied musical instruments to supplement his shows. Tambourine, kazoos, bells, and drums could turn the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" into a true clarion to war.

Imagine. A family room full of people sitting off a seven-course Thanksgiving dinner. There is a temporary pause in the conversation and suddenly my father stands up and begins to sing in an animated stage whisper:

"The night was very dark so you could hardly see
For the moon refused to shine
Two lovers kissed underneath a willow tree
For love, they pined,
Little maid was kinda 'fraid of darkness
So she said, "I'd better go"
Boy began to sigh, looked up at the sky
And told the moon his little tale of WOOOOOOOOE..."

It was on "woe" that they all chimed in. And it was very important that the "WOE" be a long, loud lament, consuming every bit of breath you had left in your lungs.

Then everyone would heartily join in: "Shine on, shine on harvest moon, up in the sky. I ain't had no lovin' since January, February, June or July..." My father would prowl the room, singing just inches from peoples' faces, encouraging their efforts, waving his arms like he was directing the New York Philharmonic. At eight I found this behavior delightful. At ten it was amusing. But at 12 it was humiliating. If our family room floor could have opened and swallowed me up I would have gratefully gone subterranean

forever. What at eight was viewed as charming and funny had suddenly become obnoxious. "Oh *DAddy*." Why was he DOING that?

When my father died we held an old fashioned wake. We had gypsy violins. We had stuffed cabbage, apple strudel and several cases of Hungarian "Bulls' Blood" wine. And at some point during the evening I found myself standing up and in an animated stage-whisper singing:

"The night was very dark so you could hardly see
For the moon refused to shine.
Two lovers kissed underneath a willow tree
For love, they pined.."

Oh *DAddy*...

DAFFODILS

5/2 – Warm sunshine and soft warm winds. Lost myself in an entrancing lethargy of gems in English poetry. I couldn't pull myself out of it. The beautiful sunshiny morning made me recite Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" and Wordsworth's "I wander'd lonely as a cloud."

A.J. Nagy diary, 1937

FDA APPROVES DRUG FOR ALZHEIMER'S TREATMENT

The FDA has just approved Reminyl for treating people with mild to moderate cases of Alzheimer's disease. In clinical trials the drug stabilized or even improved patients' memory, reasoning, and language skills. The drug, which is expected to be available in May, is made from ingredients derived from daffodils.

Channel 4 eleven o'clock news, 3/1/01

* * *

I wander'd lonely as a cloud/That floats on high o'er vales and hills.'"

My father had been in and out of the hospital several times since the New Year 1994, but he never quite made it home. The normal procedure was to release him from the hospital to a rehabilitation facility, where, ideally, he would spend a week or so undergoing physical therapy and regaining his strength before returning home. But always some

medical necessity -- an irregular heartbeat, a spike in his blood pressure, or some pesky low-grade infection-- would send him back into the hospital before he was released. Just as we were preparing his homecoming, something would grab him by the pajama top, shake him, and say, "Hey, pal, not so fast. Not this time. Back to the hospital." It was like some giant board game of Chutes & Ladders, where just when you'd spun a six and climbed the highest ladder, you would spin a one, land on a chute and slide back down three rows.

When all at once I saw a crowd/A host of golden daffodils;

This newest rehab center was his third in six weeks, and I watched him slowly descending into a lethargic depression. So one bright, bitter cold February day, on my way to visit, I stopped in the grocery store, seeking some treasure, some exotic treat, to cheer him. A pomegranate, perhaps. Or Persian figs. That's where I discovered the daffodils, dozens of pots, a brilliant oasis in the middle of the produce department.

Continuous as the stars that shine/And twinkle on the Milky Way,
They stretch'd in never-ending line/Along the margin of a bay:
Then thousand saw I at a glance/Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

There were six blooms in a pot, their heads the size of softballs. I marveled at their size. I basked in their dazzling sunny hue. And I envied their stamina during this harsh Michigan winter. I bought a pot for my father. I wished I could buy them all.

When I entered his cheerless green room, he was lying back against the pillows, eyes staring blankly ahead. He was unshaven. He looked weak and pale. I asked him how he was feeling. He was non-responsive. Medications had left his mouth parched and dry and his throat was still raspy after a recent intubation. I asked him if he'd had company the night before, testing him, knowing full well who had visited. He couldn't remember. I asked if my mother had been there yet today. He couldn't remember. I asked what he'd had for breakfast. He couldn't recall.

I drew back the heavy curtains that covered the window, opened the window to the chilled but promise-filled air, and placed the daffodils on the sill.

The waves beside them danced, but they/ Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not be but gay/In such a jocund company:

He silently and apathetically watched my movements as I arranged the pot against the brilliant blue-sky backdrop for maximum effect. Then in a soft, rasping, hesitant voice, he began to recite.

"I wander'd lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils..."

He couldn't remember what he had for breakfast or who had visited the night before, but suddenly, for a brief moment, he remembered a Wordsworth poem he had learned in Miss Evelyn Brant's English class at Mackenzie High School some fifty years before. A memory. A momentary synapse. A connection. Words and image that lasted more than half a century.

I gazed—and gazed—but little thought/What wealth the show to me had brought:

My father never did make it back home. He returned to the hospital the following week with pneumonia, entered intensive care, and died three days later. I miss him terribly. The hurt softens somewhat with time. But the missing never goes away.

For oft when on my couch I lie/In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye/ Which is the bliss of solitude;

And every year, usually late February, on a sunny day, when that early whiff of damp earth wafts in through the open window, I set off on my search for the first daffodils.

I bring home two dozen perfect blooms, arrange them in a blue vase, and place them in the center of my table.

And then my heart with pleasure fills/And dances with the daffodils.

And I open my arms to spring...

"GOD THIS IS INTERESTING"

My father's final days were spent in the Intensive Care Unit of the hospital he had checked into and out of so many times before. This time it was a one-way trip. He lay on a high bed in a small green room where most of the floor space was taken up by the bed and dozens of tentacled machines, all spouting tubes and cords and hoses hooked to his frail, sheet-shrouded body. He was awake and foggily aware, but docile in his acceptance. The array of technology was awesome. Lights, beeps, blips, and bags of fluids surrounded him. At night, when the lights were low, if you squinted your eyes just right, you could imagine his little room filled with the distant lights of some urban metropolis/cityscape twinkling in the distance. It was the last landscape he would ever behold.

One day as I sat on one of the two straight backed chairs shoe-horned into the corners of the cube, the nurses decided that my father needed to be turned over to accommodate yet another invasive treatment. Unfortunately, in spite of all the technology, there was no electric rotisserie that would automatically turn him. The job needed to be done manually by several nurses working in tandem. They'd done it before, and the rotation was fairly routine.

But as they turned my father over, he was able to cop a full 180-degree unobstructed view of the myriad of machines around him. And, as he looked up at all the blinking,

humming mechanical lifelines surrounding him, his eyes widened, he smiled, and he softly rasped, "*God*, this is interesting!!!"

Slowly declining physically. Weak. Helpless. Two days away from death. Yet curious, wondering and amazed.

"*God* this is interesting!"

THE DAY MY FATHER DIED

The day my father died was not a surprise. We chose it. We picked March 4th, a day straddling the blurry line between Michigan winter and Michigan spring. We chose a Monday, after the week-end, a day typically reserved for getting down to work. It's a day of beginnings, of sorts.

The sky was a bright, hard blue. The sun was strong, as if trying its damnedest to meld those last gray-tinged piles of snow that lingered in the shade. Trees were still black and naked. But if you looked closely, you could imagine patches of green beginning to spot the bare brown lawns. And most of all there was the smell, that damp, earthy smell of rich potting soil, or ripe geraniums, that bodes the earth's renewal. All in all, it was a perfect day.

My father had been failing for years. Like an old car, his body just seemed to be wearing out, part by part. But during Christmas he had come down with a particularly bad cold, and when he hacked in the new year with a painful sounding cough, the doctor put him in the hospital. Double pneumonia. For Christmas that year, I had given him a handsome black velour shirt from Abercrombie & Fitch. It was an extravagance I could hardly afford, but I was desperate to let him know how special he was. He wore it twice, once on New Year's Eve and again a week later on the day he was admitted to the hospital. It was the last time I saw him in street clothes. For the next few months his uniform would

be the familiar faded blue hospital gown dotted with an annoyingly non-descript pattern and held together in back by two short strings. It makes me smile now to remember him in that snappy black shirt.

Hospitalization was no trauma in our family. He had been in and out so many times during the past few years that the nurses knew him by name and looked forward to a few days of his corny jokes and cheer. But on January 5th, as my mother rolled his wheelchair up the hospital ramp, I somehow knew it would be his last hospital visit. He was old. He was weak. And frankly, I think he was just getting tired.

The next eight weeks were an endless waltz from hospital to rehab to nursing home to hospital. Finally, on Tuesday, February 23rd his heart weakened, his blood pressure dropped, his kidneys began to fail and he was remanded to Intensive Care. He was awake but groggy, aware of what was going on around him but completely passive. Waiting. That's what I thought. He was just waiting.

After five days he was only getting weaker. Now he was on a respirator, unable to eat or speak. On Saturday the doctors called a family conference. My mother, my sister and me. They explained his failing condition. They offered no hope of significant recovery. And they asked if we wanted to continue him on the respirator. My mother wept silently. My sister sobbed uncontrollably. And I, knowing he'd left specific instructions regarding such circumstances, said, "Let's let him go." We agreed to give ourselves the week-end to say our goodbyes then return on Monday morning for the end.

It's a strange feeling to go to bed at night and *know* that tomorrow would be the day your father would die, that tomorrow night at this time he would no longer be of the earth. That he would be gone. My father would be dead. Surprisingly, I slept. And I got to the hospital well ahead of my mother and sister. I wanted private time. Just me and my dad. Alone for the last time.

He recognized me. And, even though he couldn't respond, I think he knew it was time to go. I told him not to worry. That I would take care of everything. And I told him for the bazillionth time I loved him.

I told him that his brother, Joe, and sister, Elizabeth, and mother and father were all waiting for him. And that there was going to be one hell of a Hungarian party in heaven. In fact, I swore I could smell the stuffed cabbage cooking already. I held his hand and squeezed it and smiled. He no longer had the strength to even squeeze back, but when I looked at his lined and pale face I saw a single tear roll from the corner of his eye and stream down the side of his face.

One tear.

He knew.

Moments later my family arrived and then the doctors. At the scheduled time the doctors simply turned off the respirator. And within the hour he quietly, gently, peacefully took a breath. It was no different than any of the breaths he had taken during the past week. Except it was his last.

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Later, as I drove home, making phone calls, organizing the events of the coming days, compiling mental lists, I remember noticing how pure and blue the sky was. The air was clear and cold and everything seemed to have such sharpness, such definition, such an edge. I spoke aloud as if testing my voice to see if I could still speak. "March 4th 1996. The day my father died." I remember being surprised at how strong and matter-of-fact my voice sounded. And I remember feeling relief, almost euphoria, that his pain was over, his suffering was through. He was on his way to a better place.

As I turned the radio to my favorite classical music station, the first triumphant notes of Liszt's *Hungarian Fantasie* filled the car.

And, alone in the car, my heart danced a *czardas*, on a cold, clear morning in March. The day my father died.

THE JUMP

In middle age, a person can become only who he or she dares to be. Tap dancing, graduate school, trapeze lessons, they are all a part of daring to be. Even so, I continue to worry about becoming stiff in body and spirit. That's why, one fall-tinged, frost touched October Sunday last year, I got in the car and drove to Tecumseh Michigan, where I crammed myself into the back seat of a Cessna 182 four-seater, and ascended to 10,400 feet. Then, strapped to a certified skydiver, I stepped out of the plane and floated down almost two miles to the fall-colored Michigan landscape below.

It was terrifying. It was thrilling. It was a lesson from my father.

The jump was not a whim. In my never-ending quest for challenge, it was an idea I'd entertained for several months. Then I unexpectedly learned that a friend had numerous jumps to his credit, and with his urging, I made the plans. I had quietly worked for several weeks before the jump mentally readying myself for the experience. I visualized the successful jump over and over. Every activity. Every emotion. I only shared my plans with those who I knew would support my endeavors. I wanted no negative reactions to cloud my attitude. I was ready.

While my preparations were precise – a high-protein dinner, a hot bubble bath, and a detailed visualization of the jump – my previous night's sleep was restless, much like the night before a big exam. After a light breakfast, I was out the door and on the road

before 7, experiencing a familiar sense of "getting a jump" on other Sunday morning travelers. My first glimpse of the air field was disconcerting. Signage consisted of a hand-lettered, weathered board nailed to a tree, "Skydiving." Straight Ahead." Since the school was the oldest skydiving center in the country, in business for more than 35 years, I guess I expected some more *permanent* announcement. But then I glimpsed the grassy, green air strip littered with little parked planes, and the signage was forgotten. I began to focus on the jump.

First I was suited up by my instructor. Every piece of apparel, from my shoes to my tight-fitting helmet was checked and re-checked, tightened and re-tightened. I couldn't help but grin as I strapped on my final piece of equipment – an altimeter, with a face as big as a bagel. Since the jump was to be a tandem jump, I required just an hour's instruction. My jump-partner would handle many of the duties. My few tasks were regulated by altitude, not time, and I spent the hour after the instruction repeating the sequence in my head. I was impatient to get underway. The instruction provided a needed focus.

It was now 45 minutes before take-off. I was standing at the split-log fence at the edge of the field when I witnessed an actual jump. The little plane, barely a speck in the sky. Then another speck separating from the plane. Then the bright blue of the parachute emerging from the misty atmosphere. Then the outline of a body, a live person, dangling perilously from this massive piece of silk. Suddenly my stomach tightened. My head

ached. Sweat soaked my face and chest. My jumpsuit tightened around my body like a straitjacket. And I began to cry.

When my jumping partner asked what was wrong, I frankly admitted my fright. But I also knew my fear was temporary. I couldn't avoid it or flee it. I had to go *through* it. So I owned it, I felt it, and I focused on the jump. An hour later I was walking across the field toward the tiny, two-seater plane where my partner and I would fold ourselves into the cargo area until we reached the required altitude.

I was excited, I was anxious, but my fear was gone. We took off effortlessly and I began to nervously check my altimeter and perform the required duties. Helmet buckled at 4,000 feet. Goggles down a six. Metal eye-hooks attached to my partner's hooks at 8,000 feet. Awkwardly move forward in tandem to the doorway of the plane at nine. Grip the doorframe handle at 10,000 feet. Then step out onto the 12 inch by 18 inch metal platform. My next step would be a two mile drop.

I hadn't imagined the noise. The din from the plane's tiny engines was deafening. Nor had I imagined the wind. The gusts generated by the propellers buffeted my body and seemed to threaten my white-knuckled grip. My senses were assaulted, yet I had but one thought: "If I can take this next step, I never need to be afraid of anything again."

And I stepped off the tiny platform.

We free fell for 4,000 feet before we pulled the cord. Our speed reached 170 miles an hour. No tether, no net, no open parachute to impede our descent. Just the two of us falling toward the flat brown fields. I put out my arms and cheered. I was exhilarated, excited and empowered. I was WOMAN.

At 6,000 feet we pulled the cord, and the chute opened, jerking us up several hundred feet as it gathered the air in its sails and slowed our fall. And the next mile was spent drifting lazily down toward the earth. My face hurt from smiling and my throat ached from my gleeful yells. The ground grew closer and we lightly touched down on our feet, walking the last few hundred feet toward the cheering observers lining the fence. We landed on our feet. A perfect landing for the perfect jump.

The jump was yet another chapter in the life I always dreamed of living. And I am living it with gusto and passion, one adventure after another.

Just like my father.

I am my father's daughter, I say out loud to no one and to everyone as I walk to the car. And I am NOT afraid.