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Adult Education

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Adult Education

I walked into the empty classroom and the imaginary security blanket I had wrapped around my shoulders dropped to the scuff-marked floor. White walls, a gray table with a pen and blank nametags, and faded dry erase marks on the whiteboard harmonized with my bleak mood. My nose picked up the same odor it had detected downstairs in the crowded hallway. Stacks of blue plastic chairs framed by the floor-to-ceiling window against the white snowfall provided the only cheerful note.

My therapist urged me to enroll in Memoir: Tell It Like It Was. “Glenda,” she said, “You worry too much about the future. Writing will allow you to live more in the moment.” Easy for her to say; she wasn’t depressed.

Louis, my husband, had read an AARP article entitled “7 Ways to Live in the Moment” and thought it would help me more to focus on the here and now. “I think you should try some of these suggestions, Glenda Sue,” he said.

I didn’t get the connection between living in the moment by writing about the past, but if I were going to write in this classroom, I wanted some props: motivational posters, a written welcome on the board, anything encouraging. Even a few sprays of Febreze would be an improvement.

Twelve of us were waiting around the table when a frowning man hurried in fifteen minutes late. “Good morning, class. Welcome to memoir class. I’m John Kaminski from the Creative Writing Program.” He scrawled two words on the board: *family matters*. “I want you to use this short prompt to begin writing. No rules. Just start writing whatever comes to mind. We’ll break at eleven.”

The cogs in my brain engaged with a solid thunk as I squinted at the words: *family matters*. Despite shadowy edges, the letters were clear enough to cause those corroded cogs to circle, the interlocking teeth nipping at each other as ideas oozed between them like pimento cheese through a food grinder. I couldn’t pick a starting place but that wasn’t the problem. The word *family* can be an adjective or a noun. I didn’t know if the aloof Mr. Kaminski meant for us to write about how family matters or about specific family matters. Then it dawned on me that *matters* can be a noun or a verb. If he had pronounced the words, he might have emphasized one which would have clued me in.

My hands played with each other on my lap while I shifted cheek to cheek on the uncomfortable chair. I preferred to write about the importance of family. Telling stories at family gatherings was one thing. Putting them down on paper and sharing with strangers was another.

My cousin, Mary Jean, had also encouraged me to do this, but she wouldn’t like strangers laughing at our fond memories. In high school she took a dare to streak naked around the neighborhood during her birthday sleepover. None of us knew the town cop drove around in the middle of the night. I still crack up about her getting caught in her birthday suit, but Mary Jean cringes each time it’s mentioned.

Ironically, it was no secret that our Grandpa served time in the Moundsville State Penitentiary for murder. The letters he wrote home to his wife made me cry every time I read them as a child. It wasn’t cold-blooded murder. It was similar to the Hatfields’ and McCoys’ feud over a pig except Grandpa and a neighbor was feuding over some property right of way. Even though Grandpa was a prison trustee, the Warden wouldn’t let him come home for my grandmother’s funeral. That had to have broken his heart.

Taking Mary Jean’s potential reaction into consideration had been prompted by the familiar face of the woman sitting diagonally across the table from me. **Hello My Name Is**

stood out on her name tag but I couldn't tell if her name was Shelby or Shelly. She looked like the Shelby I met at Mary Jean's home once. Mary Jean said that Shelby was a New Age thinker. This woman wore a crystal necklace that nudged at cleavage which suggested surgical enhancement or a pushup bra. I might censor my writing just in case this was Mary Jean's friend.

Time began to get away from me. I heard the skinny second hand on the oversized wall clock each time it scraped over the bent minute hand. I didn't want to ask what Mr. Kaminski meant and look ignorant. I expected college instructors to be more instructive.

What if grammar counted? I dry swallowed as the cogs ground to a halt. I didn't remember what a participle was, much less what made it dangle. I also didn't know if it was correct to end a sentence with a preposition. Most of this class had probably gone to college instead of getting married after high school and starting a family. Damn, I should have taken that English refresher workshop at the Senior Center.

This was a pass/fail class, but I wanted to make a good impression. I always had the highest marks in my English classes. I didn't want to ask questions yet. Mr. Kaminski should have been specific.

Scattered jigsaw pieces of my life begged to be connected with ancestors forming the border. I knew how important they were from a genealogy seminar. I caught myself dwelling on family roots and realized that I had switched back to thinking about the importance of family. I was fretting while everyone else was writing. My shoulders had inched up around my ears. I lowered them to relieve the stress.

At the far end of the table, Mr. Kaminski seemed lost in his thoughts. Through the window behind him, I watched swirling snowflakes which sucked me in like the waterspout of a hurricane. Snowfalls in central North Carolina are not uncommon but this one was somehow peculiar. I sensed something was off, like being a half step off key. Was it the snow or the delving into the past creating this disharmony? I began typing:

Mama died at age ninety-one at peace with her Lord. I've often wished I had her faith. I'm religiously-conflicted but spiritual. Unlike most of my relatives and friends, I'm not into organized religion. At times family reunions have resembled a convening of a pseudo Ecumenical Council: Protestant, Catholic, agnostic, and heathen.

Damn, another obstacle. I didn't know if agnostic and heathen should be capitalized. Spell check was helpful but the words underlined in red bugged me so I turned it off and backslid from religion to childhood:

I've mulled over getting hypnotized to see if my childhood was as happy as I've always claimed. Dad committed suicide when I was twelve but I had a normal upbringing. This isn't what I want to write. It's important, but it's dragging me down.

When depression descends, I usually try to ignore it except for having my medication adjusted. If I drew a picture of depression, it would be a clenched fist in my stomach which tightens and flexes as if to demonstrate its power. I get a literal gut feeling of impending doom. I'm not suicidal but there are times I've gone to bed hoping I wouldn't wake up in the morning. To paraphrase George Carlin I couldn't commit suicide if my life depended on it. Louis knows I wish my family disease was something else like diabetes, but at least I can eat anything I want when I'm depressed:

A black and white image of an unsmiling girl just appeared in the mirror of my muddled mind. That first grade picture shows a somber child. Maybe I wasn't happy. Maybe my depression started then. (Note to self: ask therapist if that's possible - delete this later.)

I nudged the scroll bar up the page. I should have kept that appointment to see the psychiatrist in Chapel Hill. So far I'd mentioned murder, death, suicide, and depression. Despite Mr. Kaminski's lack of direction I was determined to relate amusing experiences.

It was time to get it in gear and write. If kinfolk didn't approve, too bad. Mr. Kaminski probably put no thought into producing that puny prompt, anyway. This agitation didn't come from a dysfunctional family. Any shameful secrets would have been repeated to the point of not being worth mentioning by now.

There was no need for some shrink to dangle a pocket watch in front of my eyes so I could discover the facts about my childhood. Besides, the co-pay would have been ridiculous on our fixed income. Louis believes what you don't know can't hurt you, but I think it can.

I began to focus on the jigsaw pieces magically scattered in my head. My nemesis shook his fist in my stomach. Damn him! There was something I couldn't afford to think about. I told myself, "Think happy and don't go there." Wherever that was, I didn't know, but I was being warned to stay away. Was I abused as a child? Maybe I was adopted? I might be illegitimate. I kept writing.

Mentally I was clutching the wire cables and shifting my weight side to side for balance as I walked straddle-legged across the swinging bridge when I heard metal chair legs making their marks on the tile floor. Everyone was getting up and Mr. Kaminski was concluding "...back in ten minutes." I had accomplished two pages.

I dug quarters from my jacket pocket, flicked bits of wool lint from my fingertips, and headed downstairs to the lounge. I don't have an addictive personality but I crave Cokes, the real thing, not diet. The sharp bite of cold Coke was fuel for thought.

Students crowded the room. I smelled peanut butter Nabs, perfumes, colognes, and that odd tobacco I'd noticed earlier. Everyone was talking or texting. Louis said so many drivers were texting that laws were being passed against it. I wondered if text messages could be saved for posterity.

In middle school my girlfriends and I wrote in our imitation leather diaries which had clasp locks with miniature keys. Things like "I was thrilled when Mike winked at me in the cafeteria." Teens aren't that naïve these days. I shudder to think what they do. We necked in parked cars but they apparently do something more involved called hooking up. I've also heard that they don't count oral sex as real sex. Back in the day I would have assumed that oral sex meant talking about **it**...you know, going all the way. Diaries documented our lives: the insecurities, hopes, and dreams. Maybe texting does the same but I doubt it.

There was a tap on my shoulder. "Glenda Sue, do you remember me? I'm Mary Jean's friend Shelby. You seem preoccupied," she said. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"That's okay. I wasn't sure I recognized you since I couldn't make out your name tag. Anyway, I was thinking about buying birthday balloons for Mary Jean after class," I fibbed. "I thought she'd enjoy having them in her office. Didn't you all meet through her job at the Arts Council?"

I listened to Shelby with one ear as I thought about my diary somewhere in the attic. Probably generations of mice had digested the pages and deposited my hopes and dreams in the insulation between the rafters. I quit writing in it when I was in seventh or eighth grade. The instant I tried to remember why, the fist punched upward and my throat closed off as if to keep my teeth from being knocked out.

I finished the Coke, tossed it in the recycle bin, and followed Shelby upstairs. Mr. Kaminski directed our attention to the board where he had written a quote from Gore Vidal: "A memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked." Then Mr. Kaminski said the average age for a memoirist was sixty-eight, and the class erupted in mostly soprano comments with a few bass tones which blended pleasingly in the previously quiet room. The sight of a few foreheads with furrows deep enough to plant corn was pure tee irony.

"Mr. Kaminski," I said, "I don't think we need to be old to reflect accurately. Don't you think younger people can? I think I could have written a more honest memoir at age forty. I can't be the only one who has forgotten things over the years."

Gnarled speckled hands shot up in the air like quail flushed by a hound dog. A discussion continued until Mr. Kaminski wrapped it up by saying "What you remember now is the important thing." Having quiet, troubled contemplation interrupted by their fervent objections was just what I needed. Their released energy improved my frame of mind and the words spilled out effortlessly.

At 11:45 I stopped writing and scanned the last two pages. I thought my cataracts were acting up. Where had those strange words come from? I read them again. It was gibberish: *It's possible that a mannerism is a truism but a truism can't be a mannerism.* What could that possibly mean?

Like the needle of a compass seeking north, my eyes were pulled to the prompt on the board. There was something that *mattered*. Were there clues in what I'd obviously concocted? Maybe Shelby could help. With all five senses on alert I returned to writing.

A pleasing whiff of cherry pipe tobacco tickled my nose. Mr. Kaminski stood behind me. "Ms. Jenkins, would you like to read what you've written about family matters?" I turned to catch the Jack Nicholson look as he raised an unkempt arched eyebrow. "To quote Martin Luther King, 'Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about *things that matter*.'"

I closed the laptop. "I'm not ready, but this is postponement is not silence." He nodded in agreement. "I suggest all of you should let your manuscripts lie dormant a day or two before continuing to write. Each week we'll discuss the previous prompt and I'll give you a new one to help you write increasingly deeper. See you next Friday."

I grabbed Shelby by the sleeve before she got to the door.

Mr. Kaminski had said to let our writing lie dormant. He hadn't said don't do photographic research. Before my lentil soup and cornbread had settled that evening, I pried a small cedar chest from an upstairs closet. I invited Louis to join me at the kitchen table but he waved the remote control and stayed in his La-Z-Boy recliner.

I opened the chest and tilted the lid back on its tarnished brass hinges. I grabbed a handful of black and white Kodak snapshots with dates printed on their serrated edges. The jumbled photos were like fallen leaves from generations of different branches of the same tree. Now photos are stored on computers, CDs, or online albums but no digital photos touched my heart like these.

The top photo in my hand almost made me slam the lid shut. It showed me posing on a rock at camp during a time when I secretly yearned to be pretty. Despite roll after black and white roll of disappointment, I kept trying to get a flattering picture. "Would you take my picture?" I had asked a girlfriend. "I'll do a movie star pose." I leaned back, pressed my knees together, and tilted them sideways. I knew that cameras told the truth, but that never

stopped me from dropping off the rolls of film at Walker's Drugstore to be developed and anxiously awaiting their return from a lab in Greensboro.

I sat at the table, clutching that shame-tinged photo. I considered using the paper shredder under the kitchen counter, but I picked up a graduation picture of my friend, Tommy. Big mistake. It jerked me back to the night I got a call about being in the Foley County Beauty Pageant. "Miss Taylor," the caller said, "Your name has been submitted as a contestant." "What do I need to do?" I asked. He rattled off the information and hung up.

I found my bathing suit, hurried to the bathroom, and locked the door. I pulled on the rump-sprung Jantzen and lowered the commode lid. I climbed up to look in the mirror over the sink. Discouraged, I sat down, tore off some toilet paper, stuffed some in each side of the built-in bra, and took another look. At least two things looked better. I got dressed, flushed my toilet tissue bosoms, and celebrated by spraying Mama's forbidden Youth Dew behind my ears. I inhaled the spicy fragrance.

The phone rang again. It was Tommy. In less than twenty seconds I was praying no one would ever find out. His cousin had played a joke on me. Tommy's mother heard them laughing about it and made him call and apologize. I pretended that I knew all along it was a joke. I never told anyone about the embarrassment I still carry over being so vulnerable.

One class and already I wondered if I had made a big mistake. So far, I'd gone from death to suicide to murder before sinking to shame and humiliation. If this tendency kept up, I'd be back in a full-blown depression before I knew I'd been sucker-punched. I closed the chest and opened my black and white marbled composition book.

Nothing inspirational came to mind so I made a list of stuff we joked about when the family got together. With a cloying scent of spice in my nose, I went upstairs and got ready for bed. The long ago fragrance of Youth Dew was so strong, I half-expected Louis to notice it when he joined me under the quilts.

The next morning I was at the kitchen table with my first cup of Folgers coffee topped off with hazelnut creamer. Louis was in the adjoining TV room absorbed in his Saturday programs. Over the years I had learned to tune out the noise. I was about to find out if it would affect my writing. I reviewed the list of anecdotes in the notebook and stretched my fingers to work out their morning stiffness. I looked at the first item on the list and wrote about a sad yet funny day.

My sisters and I were taking a break in the family room at the funeral home where our eldest brother's viewing and funeral were being held. Diane used the bathroom and said, "Let's say our final goodbyes before they close the casket." We were seconds behind her but it was too late. "Oh, sweet Jesus," I said. Janet cackled like a hen; Maggie hooted like an owl; and I snorted like a pig. It was menagerie à trois. We huddled together to keep from collapsing.

Diane was midway to the coffin by the time we reached the aisle. "Hush, you all," Maggie pleaded as her tears dripped like a spigot. She wiped her eyes and smeared mascara from eyelashes to jawbone. Her Rocky Raccoon look totally wiped out our efforts to stop laughing.

Mary Jean had to climb over three people to reach the aisle so Diane was almost to the casket. She was immaculately attired with one flaw. The tail of her long flowing skirt was tucked into the back of its waistband. Her plump butt in iridescent blue tights looked like

sausage stuffed in its casing. It caught the bright overhead lights and the attention of everyone in the room.

Mary Jean grabbed Diane's shoulders and jerked the skirt tail down. In the quiet broken only by our choking and gasping for air at the back of the room, Diane thanked her, turned to face the room, and asked, "On a scale of one to ten, how have I handled this?" Laughter trickled out tentatively then broke loose like water through the sluice gates of a dam.

My reverie was broken by a sharp knock on the kitchen porch door. I had successfully tuned out the TV noise. Mary Jean popped in looking trim in her jogging outfit. "Do you have time to talk?" My spine stiffened at the possibility that Shelby had told her I must be writing something scandalous since I'd refused Mr. Kaminski's request to share my writing with the class.

It wasn't that. Cracking her knuckles just like Mama did, Mary Jean said, "I came up with some family events you might use." She pulled a list out of her shoulder bag.

"Mary Jean, I'm in the middle of something. Leave the list with me and we'll talk later. Be thinking about family reunion stories. I've written about the swinging bridge so far. Now get a move on. You're going to be late meeting your health nut buddies." I wanted privacy to ponder the gobbledygook again, now that Shelby had identified it as automatic writing.

It was time to find the diary, too, but I was hungry. I closed the laptop in case Louis came in when he got a whiff of the sausage biscuits with gravy. I wasn't ready to share with him yet. I was in counseling so it wasn't necessary to write for therapeutic value. Although I'm a glass half full person I nevertheless hesitated to contemplate what had been in the empty half. Or what I might uncover if I searched for it.

I glanced at the clock and saw both hands on twelve. Where had the time gone? I sat there twirling my thumbs. So far most of the memories had been of my family. There were enough pieces to start putting the puzzle together but they weren't me, except for the ones I didn't want in the picture.

Did that mean anything? Maybe not, but why had I never looked back? In therapy we mainly talked about how to stay alive when you wanted to die. Maybe we should expand our boundaries. We looked for practical solutions but maybe we needed to talk about how old I was when I was potty-trained or to start analyzing my dreams.

Even though I quit writing in a good mood, I had the heebie jeebies. My nemesis opened his fist and flipped me a quote from Socrates off the end of his thumb: the one about the unexamined life not being worth living. Mr. D was up to his typical tricks. I rejected his contribution and chalked it up to writer's block. Examined or not, my life was worthwhile.

I microwaved a Healthy Choice for lunch while I glanced at the Continuing Education schedule for the next semester. I had seven more weeks to get through. I thought, "If I make it, I make it. If I don't, well, I'm not going there yet." I still had no idea in hell where that was. I went to the attic instead.

Today Mr. Kaminski said, "I met with the tenure committee just before class last week and was pretty stressed out. I apologize for not being more attentive to your concerns." I had no idea tenure existed at the community college level. "Despite the statistic I gave you, a memoir is not something that you must put off until you are older. Age doesn't matter if you are a reflective person. All that matters is that you have a story that you want to share."

“In fact, I’d like to start over and ask you to share why you’re taking this class. I see that few name tags survived, so please start by giving your name. Ms. Pollard, would you go first and then we’ll go clockwise around the table.”

Shelby had her name tag prominently displayed. “Hey, I’m Shelby. I enjoy writing and want to improve my skills. A few of you know I’m a painter but I’m exploring other ways to express myself creatively.”

When it was my turn, I said, “This is my first writing class. I’m here because three people recommended it.” By the time the last person spoke, there were various reasons for our participation: not sure why, something interesting to do, being seriously ill and wanting to write about the experience, needing to set some things straight, and wanting to work on a family history. It didn’t sound like anyone else was there for their mental health.

We then read one page each about *family matters*. Almost everyone had chickened out and written about the importance of family in society.

Mr. Kaminski distributed handouts. There was no apology for the offensive statistic but he was showing improvement. Maybe student evaluations were part of the tenure process. He referred to the materials as he lectured on the advantages and disadvantages of different structures for memoir. I looked forward to the prompt now that I had my list of funny stories.

I was raring to go when he announced the prompt: *What is something you dislike about yourself?* I was floored. What did that have to do with memoir? Like a flasher the naked truth exposed itself and I couldn’t look away. “For the love of Pete, I’m jealous of Mary Jean!” I slipped on my rimless Sarah Palins and opened a new document. I vowed to tell the truth no matter how embarrassing.

After break, Shelby volunteered to read first. I expected her to say she needed to lose weight or quit smoking. Her eyes met mine across the table then dropped to her laptop screen. Maybe she too felt a need to censor. I forced myself to pay attention instead of fretting over what I’d written.

“I dislike my hypocrisy. I’m not dishonest but I am two-faced. This is not an epiphany but I’ve never had to put the feeling into words.” She looked around the table. “This is karma. The hypocrisy would be compounded if I didn’t explain honestly.”

“On Sunday mornings I teach Sunday school and sing in the church choir. Thursday evenings I’m in a New Age discussion group exploring the concept of collective consciousness. Each group accepts me fully when, in reality, I don’t buy every belief of either group. I function in both groups the Al-Anon way; I take what I need and leave the rest. I am honest when I speak up. The hypocrisy is I don’t speak up when I don’t agree.”

Shelby raised her eyes as she finished reading. I pitted my sin of jealousy against her sin of hypocrisy and awaited the solace of exoneration. The room was quiet. I had a hunch the others hadn’t been so forthcoming about their self dislike and weren’t eager to share. When the anticipated solace didn’t materialize, I jumped in without a life jacket before I could reflect on the depth or temperature of the water.

“What I dislike about myself is I have a streak of jealousy I didn’t know about until now. To explore this, I used the Socratic Method we learned in high school: question and answer. Who am I jealous of? I’m jealous of my cousin, Mary Jean. Why am I jealous? I’m not sure. What caused the jealousy? I don’t know.”

All that soul-searching and no explanation was humiliating. I was so ashamed of myself. I wanted to go home and hide. I wanted privacy to hunt for clues to the jealousy in the blather from last week. Now I understood why Shelby could answer my questions about

the weird writing she identified as automatic writing. No doubt she also knew about Tarot cards and those cubes called runes. A psychic or Shelby would probably be more helpful than memoir writing if I wanted to solve this mystery.

That weekend I read Louis the last page in the diary I had abandoned when overwhelmed with a situation I was too young to understand but young enough to erase it from my mind like math problems on a blackboard.

“Dear Diary, I just heard something very interesting when my Mama was talking to Aunt Beth. She said that she almost gave ME away to Aunt Beth!! Why would my Mama almost give me away? What changed her mind? Anyway I have to figure out why I almost was given away and I’m about to figure out why. Time to do some research and SNEAKING around my Mama’s stuff.”

As a former accountant Louis was intuitive when it came to numbers and he caught a mistake I’d missed. The last entry hadn’t been in eighth grade. I’d written 1956 but the tail of the six drooped over and it looked like an eight. However, neither of us thought my being eleven instead of thirteen was significant. “Louis,” I said, “I can’t think of anything I did in sixth grade *to make Mama consider giving me away*. My Lord! Where in the world did that come from?”

We stared at the faded words written in cursive with a No. 2 pencil. My chest tightened like a clock being wound. I didn’t remember doing anything horrible. Maybe things would make more sense if I organized the information. As a right-brained person I chanted “X to the left and Y to the sky” as I constructed a graph in my lined notebook. That math trick was a childhood memory, embedded in my brain with other axioms like “I before e except after c.” Right there was proof there was no problem with my memory.

On Friday most of us arrived at class early. We stood around and chatted about our writing and a mutual longing for spring. The latter topic sparked a conversation about what winters were like when we were young. We were knee deep in imaginary snowdrifts when Mr. Kaminski came through the door. We were bonding as a group yet we sat down in our previously claimed places except for Shelby who shifted to the empty chair directly across from me.

We’d already discussed last week’s prompt so we took turns sharing what we’d written at home. Two of the men read stories that proved testosterone wasn’t the only hormone circulating in their bodies. Their touching stories sparked new memories for the rest of us. I’m still amazed by how that phenomenon works.

When break was announced Shelby leaned forward. “Have you found any gems in the automatic writing?” I showed her two segments which had begged to be highlighted: *they had a similar mannerism* and *parents need all the help they can get*. I didn’t think I had any particular mannerism but Shelby said I twiddled my thumbs in class.

“Parents need all the help they can get” gives me the willies,” I said. “Could it mean I wasn’t a good parent to Shirley? Or maybe my parents couldn’t get some help they needed for me?” Shelby studied the graph and failed to find significance between the events on the Y axis and the dates on the X axis. Our discussion was interrupted when the others trickled back to class.

Mr. Kaminski lectured on truth versus betrayal: how much to reveal about people close to us. “Write as though everyone were dead and decide later whether or not to tell all.”

He went to the board and printed the writing prompt: *What is a secret you're not supposed to know?*

My fingers stuck to the keys. The right middle finger wouldn't move up to "I" and my left pinkie wouldn't slide down to the shift key. Short of instant paralysis there was no reason for that. I hadn't broken my neck or been bitten by a rattlesnake so it wasn't paralysis. It had to be my brain was refusing to give my fingers permission to type.

With eyes shut I asked myself, "Do I know a secret I'm not supposed to know?" Some of the missing pieces came together. I recalled the overheard phone conversation which had led to my repressing the unbearable. The overflow of relief and sorrow confused my taste buds like bittersweet chocolate.

To kill time I pretended to be writing about a secret but I wasn't. After class I asked Shelby to join me in the lounge. She listened to my story but she didn't think I should share something with Mary Jean that I didn't fully understand yet. I was frustrated when Shelby saw no reason to involve Mary Jean. They were good friends. If Shelby was such a good friend she should want Mary Jean to know everything that had to do with her own family.

Driving home I couldn't distinguish between my tears and the rain as the windshield wipers slapped back and forth. It wasn't fair I had to keep the secret. When I got home Louis met me in the kitchen. He saw my water-streaked makeup and asked, "Did you made a decision?" While he hugged me I said, "I'm getting there. I need a little more time."

I gave the matter serious consideration for another week. On Friday Mr. Kaminski's lecture on writing about people who were still living was uncanny. I scribbled notes on the handout entitled "Is It Necessary to Tell All?"

The prompt, however, was a letdown: *What has been your most unusual experience?* I began: *The most unusual experience was when Mary Jean confessed she was jealous of me and then refused to say why. I'd ignored that just like I'd ignored my jealousy of her.* I highlighted those two sentences, hit delete and began again:

The most unusual experience in my life was when my father committed suicide. At age twelve I had little understanding of depression and suicide hadn't entered my mind. Dad rarely talked but the day before he said, "Glenda Sue, Mama and I are so lucky to have you. You sure have brightened our lives." For years I thought I must have done something to make him kill himself in spite of what he'd said.

Saturday I called Mary Jean. "Could you meet me next Sunday afternoon at The Creamery to talk about my memoir?" "That's weird," she said. "I just picked up the phone to ask you to meet me. No problem. See you at three then."

As I thought about what I wanted to say to Mary Jean, the partial revelation from the prompt about a secret expanded like a dry sponge dropped in a bathtub. I more fully recalled that conversation I overheard just before Dad and Mama went to their Odd Fellows and Rebekah's lodge meetings. I was in their bedroom ten seconds after the front door clicked shut.

The third drawer down in their file cabinet held a file marked "Legal Documents." I grabbed it and looked for any paper with my name on it. It was in their will. An inch past that

document was my birth certificate. I was disappointed to find nothing else that mentioned me.

All these years later I thought I must have found something which caused me to repress the phone conversation I'd recorded in my diary entry. As I sat at the kitchen table I had an eerie sensation that my forehead was a marquee and the answer was scrolling across it too quickly for my eyes to read what my brain insisted was there.

I hurried to the attic where Louis and I had stored my parents' file cabinet when we settled their estate. I found the legal documents folder and took it downstairs. I stuck my head into the TV room. "Louis, would you come in here while I look at some of Mama and Dad's private papers. I'm pretty sure I'll find something to explain my apprehension." If so, I knew I'd need his support.

Stuck to the back of an open gummed envelope we found a folded form from a county in West Virginia but not where we had lived. The birth certificate listed Sue and Earl Taylor as parents to a female child named Mary Jean Taylor born two years after me.

I held the seven by eight inch yellowed document in jittery hands. Mary Jean wasn't my cousin. She was the daughter Mama had been talking about with Aunt Beth. When Mama had referred to giving up her daughter, I assumed she was talking about me but she was talking about Mary Jean, my sister who was adopted by our aunt and uncle.

Louis sat beside me on the sofa while I called Aunt Beth. I had a white-knuckled grip on the receiver. "Louis," I said after hanging up, "Would you stay nearby while I do some writing? I can't talk about what Aunt Beth just told me until I clear my head and I think the best way to do that is to get it down in black and white." He kissed my forehead and said, "I'll do better than that. I'll get the supper cleanup done and the coffee ready for breakfast."

My final childhood entry is clarified by what the diary keeps secret now. I was learning that writing things down is a good way of processing...if you write your way to the end and don't stop midstream:

Dear Diary, I've learned from Aunt Beth that when I was two years old my Dad was fighting depression. Mama was taking care of him and me plus working night shift at a pulp wood plant to be home during the day. I didn't understand the situation or know she was pregnant. Knowing her and considering what Aunt Beth said abortion was out of the question. Mama was exhausted and our financial situation was so bad they had applied for welfare benefits. We were living in West Virginia then.

Aunt Beth and Uncle Jesse lived two hours away and didn't have children. Probably because when Uncle Jesse was young he had mumps which dropped on him. Knowing about Mama's pregnancy and Dad's nerve problems, they approached my parents. "I told Sue and Earl that we knew how tough things were," Aunt Beth had told me, "and we wanted to help out. We asked them to consider letting us adopt the new baby or you--that it would be an answer to our prayers. We promised we'd move nearby when possible so the two of you could attend the same schools. We promised to love either of you as our own."

My parents made the choice. Arrangements were made for Aunt Beth's OB-GYN to deliver the baby in another town. Their attorney handled the legalities and Mary Jean left the hospital with them while my parents returned home to report a stillbirth to friends. Mama's situation didn't improve but didn't get worse until Dad got to the day he couldn't get

through. After the funeral, we moved to North Carolina where Mama found a better job in the textile mills.

Aunt Beth and Uncle Jesse kept their promise. He found a job and they moved here when I was in sixth grade. Since then Mary Jean and I have been inseparable. I didn't know we really were sisters but Mary Jean did. Mama didn't want them to tell Mary Jean until after Mama died. However, Aunt Beth and Uncle Jesse worried that Mary Jean would accidentally find out so they told her just before they moved here. As she got older Mary Jean asked questions and they filled in the gaps.

Louis had listened as I read. He empathized with my relief that I could reconcile my jealousy of Mary Jean now that I understood my subconscious conclusion that she was better than me since she was loved by her parents while mine considered giving me away. I also understood the jealousy Mary Jean had kept secret from me. She thought my parents' choice meant they loved me more than her.

My parents had made an excruciating choice. They kept me, the daughter with whom they were bonded, and relinquished the new daughter and all she could have been in their lives. I had overheard a phone call which was detailed enough to frighten me but vague in the parts which might have been reassuring. I heard enough to shut down.

I didn't tell Louis I was going to the Creamery to ask Mary Jean how she felt about my knowledge of the adoption and especially the possibility of including it in my memoir. I was pulling on my jacket at two forty-five when the phone rang.

"Glenda Sue, I need you now, right now."

"What, Mary Jean? Speak up; I can't hear you."

"I'm at Mercy Hospital. Mom and Daddy are dead. Please come. No one's answering the phone at home."

Returning to the nursing home Aunt Beth had entered a four way intersection when a tractor trailer ran a red light as she was turning left across his lane. He slammed into them at a high speed. Mary Jean's parents were killed instantly. Crying and holding each other, Mary Jean and I worked on arrangements until her husband arrived.

That evening Louis and I ate take-out and discussed the tragedy. He asked if I had said anything to Mary Jean about including her adoption in my memoir. "Nothing," I said. "Before the accident I had already decided to keep my mouth shut." That was the first time I had lied to my husband.

Emotionally empty I put my head down on the table and slumped when the left hook landed. I had focused on my needs and hadn't thought things through. I was so depressed that I kept to my bedroom for two days. I read, didn't take phone calls, and stayed in my flannel pajamas.

Two weeks after the funeral Mary Jean asked me to come to the Art Center. We were sitting in her office drinking Cokes when she asked what I was learning from Mr. Kaminski's class. "Well," I said, "I now know what that odd tobacco smell was. Pot sure doesn't smell as good as pipe tobacco, but it beats the hell out of stale cigarette smoke." Mary Jean got a kick out of that. She changed the subject when she quit laughing.

“Glenda Sue, I wanted to let you know that Mother called me the day before the accident and explained about your calling her. Your mother was afraid you would think less of her because she let Mother and Dad adopt me. You’ve been thoughtful and sweet by not saying anything to me. I treasure that. Aunt Sue didn’t want you to know as long as she and Mother were living. I had planned to tell you at the Creamery even though Mother discouraged it. I guess that didn’t matter in the end, but I sense you need to talk now.” Mary Jean held me as I cried. I didn’t bring up the possibility of writing about it. It was her story more than mine.

Mary Jean came by two weeks later after her Saturday morning run to join Louis and me for a late breakfast of coffee and sausage biscuits. The three of us laughed together around the kitchen table, joking that we needed to move a branch or two on the family tree to keep track of the changes: Mary Jean and I were sisters, not cousins; my parents were her parents; Shirley was her niece, not first cousin; her now deceased parents were her aunt and uncle; Louis was her brother-in-law, not cousin; and I had a new brother-in-law who used to be my cousin by marriage.

We couldn’t remember the lyrics but we managed to sing the chorus of I’m My Own Grandpa. Mary Jean and I thought it was a Grandpa Jones song but Louis knew that Ray Stevens sang it, too. I’m learning to appreciate his collection of TV trivia.

When I enrolled at the community college I thought adult education referred to the curriculum. I learned more about myself than memoir writing. Currently the depression has let up and I’m not anxious now that I’ve confessed to Louis about lying to him. I took care of that after Mary Jean left after our breakfast. Louis wasn’t upset. It wasn’t the first reminder of why I’d married him.

The next two classes have me intrigued, especially if I write deeper. Mr. Kaminski got tenure and his teaching skills reflect his self-confidence. He has already given us handouts and references for both classes. The topic next week is “Influential People in My Life: Good and Bad” and the handouts refer to religion and racism. God only knows what prompt he’ll come up with but I can handle it.

As much as I’ve learned about myself and about memoir writing, I’m not so comfortable with the final topic. I anticipated that Mr. Kaminski would choose a topic leading to a writing prompt about our writing experiences. Instead the topic is “Sex” and the handout is a questionnaire to be completed prior to class. I refuse to dwell on potential prompts.

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