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# Persistence: "My Grandmother's Eyes" and Other Memories

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**PERSISTENCE: “MY GRANDMOTHER’S EYES” AND OTHER MEMORIES**

A Thesis submitted to  
The Graduate College of  
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of English

by  
Christine Fede Williams

Approved by  
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Marshall University  
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## Dedication

Persistence: “My Grandmother’s Eyes” and Other Memories is dedicated to Jim, Kevin, James, Luke, and Paul. Please consider this work my love letter to you all. My only regret is that I have so many other stories that I have yet to tell you.

And my collection is dedicated to my extended family, Dad’s and Mom’s side, whose warmth, kindness, and sense of humor is the stuff of which legends are made, or at least “Christmas: A Journey.” I think of you often and I love you all.

And this work is dedicated to the resilient people of Japan. Your language and culture have enriched my life. Thank you. My prayers and thoughts are with you as you face difficult challenges after the Tohoku Earthquake.

March 11, 2011

## Acknowledgements

To me, the idea of a writer plugging away in isolation is a myth. My essays required the help of many people. First, my thesis committee faithfully supported me despite delays to scheduling work on my thesis. Dr. Anthony Viola patiently encouraged me, giving me the freedom to write what I needed to write. Without his insight and editorial ability, this collection would be a shadow of what it is. Dr. Chris Green guided me to precise meaning in my writing. Dr. Kelli Prejean's friendliness and her surgical corrections were much needed and appreciated.

Because I have written about my life, my family and friends were an important source of facts. My mother answered lists of questions during weekly phone calls and reminded me why I have lived as I have. My husband, Jim, believed in me and edited my drafts with determination, good humor, and his purple pen. I am grateful to James B. Williams, Jr. who checked facts concerning the Japanese language and culture in "Renaming Oriental Avenue." Also, I appreciate Cindy for allowing me to include her insights in the same essay. And thank you for being you. My thanks to Maryann for her observation about our Christmases together, included in "Christmas: A Journey."

Thank you to Donna, Sue, Cathy Jo, and my other friends at Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church, who knew when they asked about my thesis that I would not stop talking. Yet, they asked anyway. Thank you for your prayers and encouragement.

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Each family member and friend helped make me who I am and so contributed to this work. Any errors are mine alone.

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## ABSTRACT

### PERSISTENCE: “MY GRANDMOTHER’S EYES’ AND OTHER MEMORIES

Christine Fede Williams

Persistence: “My Grandmother’s Eyes” and Other Memories is a collection of five essays based on the author’s life. “My Grandmother’s Eyes” depicts the difficult, but loving, communication between the author and her grandmother, who speaks Italian as a first language. “Christmas: A Journey” compares and contrasts the celebration of Christmas in the author’s Italian-American family and her celebration of Christmas as an adult. “Room in My Heart” describes the events leading up to a decision to adopt a child. “Renaming Oriental Avenue” follows three threads: the author’s relationship to the *Monopoly* game; the author’s study of the Japanese language and culture; and the difficulties and joys of intercultural relationships. “Four Faces of Joy” is a series of meditations in which four stressful situations are reclaimed as joyful. Themes include multiculturalism, family, Christmas, adoption, friendship, faith, and joy.

## INTRODUCTION

I come from a family of storytellers. Dad would entertain my sister, Ginny, and me with colorful stories of his childhood escapades in Little Italy on the lower east side of Manhattan near Chinatown. I was in my teens before I understood that Dad had grown up poor because his tales were lively and suffused with love of family. Dad enjoyed telling Ginny and me his childhood stories and also inventing narratives. I have a vivid memory of waiting while Mom conducted business at a stodgy, marble-veneered bank near our home, long before ATMs eliminated time-consuming lines for simple deposits and withdrawals. Apparently, Mom's wait took longer than Ginny and I could endure, so Dad took us aside and began pointing out strangers and fictionalizing their lives, beginning with plausible plots, but soon veering to the absurd. I have to wonder now if he was amused by how far he could push the limits of our trust and youthful gullibility.

My mother also told my sister and me stories. Mom was less adventurous than Dad, but she still had a large arsenal of vignettes about her childhood, her work at Western Union, her courtship and marriage to Dad, and Ginny's and my childhood. While Dad's stories almost never ended with a moral, Mom's almost always did, even the funny tales. By the time I was in college, I had heard enough family history and asked Mom to stop. But, when I saw my first child play gleefully in a laundry basket full of clean, dry cloth diapers, tossing them in the air with belly-shaking laughter, I better understood my mother's memory, precious to her, of me at two-years-old imagining an empty bureau drawer as a ship at sea, and I began to long for Mom's stories. Now I ask her about her childhood and her parents, and I request to hear her yarns to amuse us both, so I can better understand who she is. I am glad that I did not wait too long.

Despite the atmosphere of storytelling in my formative years, I earned my undergraduate degree in English, concentrating in literature, on reading the stories of others, rather than on writing my own. Later, when I was raising my children, I often regaled them with the tales that my parents told me, plus events from my children's childhoods, and some of the stories that are the basis for the following memoirs and essays. After my children were more self-sufficient, I began my graduate degree in English. By then, I had matured to an attitude of trying what I had left unattempted. I do not know if I just felt a freedom from worry about grades or if spending more than twenty years of encouraging my children, other family members, and friends to persevere finally made sense in my own life, but I became determined to fill in the gaps in my formal education in English, which included registering for at least one course in writing in creative nonfiction. Two writing courses followed the first, a creative nonfiction workshop and a fiction workshop. However, I have focused on creative nonfiction.

In writing my thesis, because I have written not just about myself but necessarily about my family and friends, I have tried to heed Annie Dillard's warning in "To Fashion a Text": "I tried," she wrote, "to leave out anything that might trouble my family" (344). Indeed, aware of my dilemma of wanting to write honestly, yet not willing to embarrass my loved ones, on several occasions after a good night's sleep, I immediately softened or removed entirely a word, a sentence, a paragraph. My work, without a relationship with my family and friends, would be pointless. My writing is meant to encourage and strengthen others. To tear down another would be counterproductive.

The best part about writing creative nonfiction is I do not have to justify everything that happened. As Mary McCarthy writes in Memories of a Catholic Girlhood about her own family, "Luckily, I am writing a memoir and not a work of fiction, and therefore I do not have to account

for my grandmother's unpleasing character and look for the Oedipal fixation or the traumatic experience which would give her that clinical authenticity that is nowadays so desirable in portraiture" (33). Thankfully, my memories of my grandmothers are much happier than McCarthy's, but my view is the same as McCarthy's: the following events did happen and this is how I remember them. That is enough.

Overall, my writing has been the result of layers upon layers of text like a sand painting in a jar. Although the basis for each finished work had its origin in one of two writing classes related to creative nonfiction, numerous pages of additions over a period of a year are the results of life happening, as I experienced similar events. For example, the description of snow falling in "Joy in Nature" was augmented by a lovely snowfall while I pedaled on a stationary bicycle at the gym in December 2010, at least three years after the snowy day that provoked my essay. Likewise, I spent time rewriting sections about my grumblings on one of many school snow days late in 2010.

My essays have required a great deal of research, and I have included information from frequent consultations with those who were present during an event. My mother has been, like the Ghost of Christmas Past, a considerable help in jogging my memory about past Christmas Eves, my grandparents, and my father. The results contributed to "Christmas: A Journey" and "My Grandmother's Eyes." In addition, I have quoted in "Renaming Oriental Avenue" part of an actual conversation that my mother and I had one year or so ago. I am also indebted to my husband. Jim generously allowed me to draw on his memories, especially when I was rewriting "Christmas: A Journey" and "Room in My Heart."

My research has taken other forms, too. For “Renaming Oriental Avenue,” I used the internet to research the *Monopoly* game. In addition, I referred to my copious notes from my diverse reading when I studied the Japanese language and culture. Later, on a family trip to visit my sister and her family, my mother, my husband, Jim, and my son Paul visited the Oriental Avenue area of Atlantic City, where I photographed Tony Boloney’s, Absecon Lighthouse, and environs. These reference photographs were extremely helpful in describing the Oriental Avenue area. Because I planned to use “Renaming Oriental Avenue” in my creative thesis, I took notes in addition to photographs. The conversation at Tony Boloney’s is almost verbatim; I wrote as rapidly and surreptitiously as I could.

As I have found, one of the most difficult aspects of a creative work is deciding what to include and what to omit, in text and in form. In “To Fashion a Text,” Annie Dillard writes: “The best memoirs, I think, forge their own forms. The writer of any work, and particularly any nonfiction work, must decide two crucial points: what to put in and what to leave out” (338).

My research for “Room in My Heart” required that I reread an actual application that I had written in the course of the adoption process. I chose to be selective about questions that would best reflect my state of mind when I pursued adoption. Although most of the questions are quoted directly from the application, I expanded on almost all of the answers; my application was followed by interviews, and through the interviews and as time has passed, I have comprehended better my thinking back then. In addition, I kept the form of the application portion of the essay similar to the actual application, as if the reader is a social worker evaluating my application.

Deciding what to include and what to omit also extends to which truths need to be told. Although “Christmas: A Journey” is centered upon the pivotal first Christmas that Jimmy, whom I married later, joined my family, it is a compilation of many Christmas Eves that I spent with my father’s family. As such, my grandmother was not actually present the year I turned sixteen, but had passed away about ten months before. However, my grandmother is so firmly fixed in my Christmas memories that I chose to include her without explanation within the memoir.

Of the two creative nonfiction graduate writing courses that I have completed, the first course was “Technology Multimedia Creative Nonfiction: Creative Writing in Multimedia Narrative (Nonfiction).” The course melded the development of a website, using digital photography, short digital films, and text in the form of creative nonfiction. My essay “Christmas: A Journey” began as Dr. Anthony Viola’s in-class assignment on the first evening. The assignment was: “Take a simple fact from your family history and in three paragraphs, elaborate . . . .” Since the course began in January, Christmas was still on my mind, and I wrote a paragraph and one-half that, later in the course, I developed into an eleven-page memoir. Although I have since taken out several pages of extraneous material and added more than ten pages, the basic concept of the contrast between the Sicilian-American celebration of Christmas of my childhood and my Christmases in West Virginia as an adult began to take shape during that first evening class. Although the essay began as a text memoir, it was highly influenced by growing in a technology class.

Writing in a technology course is much like athletic cross-training. Athletes train in ways other than their primary sport to improve overall effectiveness. Writing, while choosing and cropping photographs, planning photographic layouts, and framing video shots, was a type of artistic cross-training: visual art affected written art. For example, I have consciously constructed

the piece with the flow of a chronological plot describing the Christmas when I was sixteen versus my Christmas as an adult. However, in both the early section and the second part, I take the reader aside, as if clicking on a link in a website. I introduce the reader to various members of my family through brief tales that capture the essence of an individual personality: Aunt Margie referees, while Aunt Pat cracks nuts, and Aunt Millie luxuriously pares an apple. Dabbling in making a short film also influenced this memoir in a variety of groupings, long-shots and close-ups as it were. For example, in a long shot, my family enters and leaves my grandparents' apartment, but in a close-up, I explain to Jimmy how to eat a lobster. As a writer, I switch between the views. Although the essay is clearly from my point of view, I have included stories from before I was born, flashbacks that delineate my family's devotion. For example, when my cousin tussled with her parochial school's nuns over the existence of Santa Claus, my dad left work to champion her cause.

In addition to the influences of technology, several memoirs and essays informed "Christmas: A Journey." In "The Landscape of Creative Nonfiction," Jocelyn Bartkevics discusses one of the issues concerning creative nonfiction, and asks if recording the facts is the same as presenting the truth. She writes of a discussion with friends at a birthday party:

We reached common ground in the end, I think, because we shifted both our working notion of genre and our view of "the person." When my friends claimed that nonfiction could work only with the aid of a tape recorder, their concept of the person was external, the person as captured by a machine. They had shared the assumption, arrived at by habit, that nonfiction was restricted to objectivity and reporting, that incongruity must be reasoned away. Fact, as Virginia Woolf points out, is not necessarily the same as truth . . . . "Nonfiction"

is not a synonym for “recorded surface.” It has the range to sweep inward, follow the path of the mind, add layers of contemporaneous imagination, memory, and dream to the observable events of the present moment. (332)

I have included many visible facts in my essay and many elements are rich in detail. The food, the Christmas tree, and the laughter are all recordable. In fact, I mention a movie camera was rolling for Santa Claus’s appearance; there are recordings of these events. But, without the sense of love and fellowship, without the sense of emotional glow that is not fact, my essay would be dry as dust, an archeological report rather than a praise of home, family, and faith. The theme that I developed in this essay, the fulfillment of human warmth and closeness, is a basic need. Several of my classmates mentioned that they would like to have a family like mine. I wish they were so blessed, too. But I do hint throughout the essay at the frailties and weaknesses. No one in the essay is perfect—rather each individual is having a very good day. Love and patience bear with the foibles of others and, ultimately, brings out the best in each one, whose interior story cannot be recorded.

Two other essays influenced “Christmas: A Journey,” including “Silent Dancing,” by Judith Ortiz Cofer. Although Cofer’s memoir details events in a Puerto Rican family two decades before the memoir of my family, I seriously considered her treatment of growing up biculturally. Rather than make a reader feel excluded, I have tried to draw in the reader much as my grandparents tried to welcome me into their world. While I have not translated every word or phrase, I have grouped together similar items, like seafood, so that the reader does not feel completely lost. Also, Cofer’s memoir gives a tangible feeling of family togetherness; even as she describes events that she did not understand as a child, her family shows strength and loyalty. I have tried to reflect the closeness in my family, even in differences of opinion. The two brief,

and annually recurring, arguments between my grandparents did not dampen the cheerfulness of the evening.

“Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction,” by Bret Lott, was another essay that influenced “Christmas: A Journey.” After warning the writer to examine himself or herself carefully, Lott continues:

Which brings me to another major point on our way toward a definition: creative nonfiction cannot at any time be self-serving. There is no room here for grandstanding of oneself. To my way of thinking—and this is me speaking as a follower of Christ, and therefore one well aware of my transgressions, my iniquities, my falling short of the glory of God—ninety-nine times out of a hundred the answer to the question, Is this wisdom, or is this folly? is, Folly. Hands down. (395)

Although Lott was primarily addressing the problem of pride and cautioned against improving one’s image when writing creative nonfiction, I had a related problem when rewriting “Christmas: A Journey.” In my earliest draft, I alternated time periods, describing a piece of my youth and then a part of my adulthood experience. As I attempted to augment my memoir, I spent a considerable amount of time trying to force the pattern to work. However, life does not fall into neat parallels. I stubbornly separated the memoir into two strands and printed them out in consecutive order, attempting to alternate the past and present. Again, I fussed and fumed until I had an epiphany: my approach, which I had observed in numerous published memoirs and essays, would not work for this particular piece. There are several reasons for the unmanageability. Simply, as Dr. Mary Moore had warned me about a research paper that I wrote

in her class, my argument was too complicated to flow easily with this structure. Once I admitted my folly, the memoir proceeded more easily. Two strands did not give the reader a proper understanding of my *before* to comprehend my *after*. The context was missing. After I made the decision to write one chronological thread, many insights became clear that had earlier eluded me, and my writing flowed more quickly.

Later in that first creative nonfiction course, Dr. Viola assigned a project to develop a hypertext around a word describing an emotion. The resulting essay is “Four Faces of Joy.” There are several reasons why I chose to explore the emotion of joy. First, Christmas, a season of joy, had just passed and the dark and cold of winter had settled in, incentive enough to seek joy. Another reason was that I had recently received word of a close friend’s struggle with cancer. I had lost family and friends to cancer and knew the disease to be a joy-sapper. Choosing to write about my search for joy in sorrow was part of my coping mechanism. Finally, as a child and into my undergraduate years, although I laughed frequently, I more often carried a sense of gloom. During that time, Jim told me once that I could find a gray cloud around any silver lining. I carried too many problems that were not mine. After I became a Christian during my undergraduate years (and for many years since) the light of hope and peace have broken through to me as I read my Bible and prayed. As a result my essay “Four Faces of Joy” can be seen as a series of meditations in which I explore a stressful situation and find my way to joy.

In my original essay, I produced about eight pages, including a definition of joy, a section on creating joy, and numerous quotes about joy. For my thesis, I cut those parts, and focused on my four related sections on joy in nature, in another’s triumph, in work, and in sorrow. Originally, I had not planned to include my essay on joy in my thesis. It seemed rougher than my other essays and needed a great deal of additional material; the draft from the course seemed

unfinished to me. Most heartbreaking to me, about eight months before I began my thesis, I lost the friend who is the cause of my sorrow in my essay. Thankfully, when I began rewriting “Joy in Sorrow” toward the end of the semester, I had healed more. I am not sorry that I was able to persevere.

The second writing class that I completed, “Creative Writing: Nonfiction,” also was offered as a technology class. I had already planned to write a creative thesis, so I developed my memoirs and essays in this course as much as possible with my thesis in mind, hoping that later I could polish the pieces further. The first assignment was to look at the *Monopoly* game board that Dr. Viola arranged in the classroom, and write about how the game, a game piece, a property or other aspect of the game had influenced my life. When I ambled over to the game, I had few thoughts on how I would approach the assignment. I had not played *Monopoly* in many years. However, when my eyes fell on Oriental Avenue, I giggled. One year before I applied to Marshall University’s graduate program, I earned six college credits by studying Japanese, and thus fulfilled the graduate program’s language requirement. My family and I have other ties to Asia, some of which are described within the essay “Renaming Oriental Avenue.” I developed my minor project “Renaming Oriental Avenue” while concurrently developing my major project for that class, “To Begin,” the title being a translation of the Japanese greeting “*Hajimemashite.*” “To Begin” is a multimedia Powerpoint presentation that contains numerous photographs and illustrations and carefully timed background music, the Yosida Brothers’ “Starting on a Journey.” Working on an essay for a multimedia project affected the writing choices that I made at that time. My writing and visuals had to complement each other. I severely edited my essay to legibly fit on each slide. When I started to rewrite “To Begin” as a full length essay, I developed text by describing visuals from the Powerpoint presentation, but I also framed the essay with a

story about coming to terms with the Oriental/Asian controversy while I redecorated a bedroom as an Asian-themed guestroom. The more I wrote, the more the essay took on a life of its own. My four- to six-page text from my Powerpoint presentation morphed into a fourteen-page cultural criticism and plea for love and kindness to others. Tolerance is, after all, a cheap replacement for love.

My primary influence in writing “Renaming Oriental Avenue” was John McPhee’s “The Search for Marvin Gardens.” Although McPhee’s essay contains only two brief mentions of Oriental Avenue, McPhee alternates his record of an actual *Monopoly* game in which he participated with the history of *Monopoly* and descriptions of actual places for which *Monopoly* properties are named. While I chose not to play *Monopoly*, I included a reminiscence of my sister and me playing *Monopoly*, information about the game in general and more specifically the history of Oriental Avenue. Also, I have spent considerable space exploring the Eastern/Western relationship through my understanding of the Japanese culture. My understanding of tensions between the cultures is informed by my experiences as a Sicilian-American.

McPhee’s research method also influenced my approach to “Renaming Oriental Avenue.” McPhee visited and described various places that are named on the *Monopoly* board. I was impressed by his detailed descriptions. For example, McPhee describes Baltic Avenue: “The glass crunches underfoot like coarse sand” (190). Later, he sets a dismal scene: “In a vacant lot on Tennessee is a white Ford station wagon stripped to the chassis. The windows are smashed. A plastic Clorox bottle sits on the driver’s seat. The wind has pressed newspaper against the chain-link fence around the lot” (192). I knew that if I strolled Oriental Avenue, my observations would add vibrancy to my essay, so I took that opportunity when I visited my sister, who lives outside of Atlantic City, two summers before I began work on my thesis. While the description

of Tony Boloney's added sensory details to my essay, the conversation that I overheard in the restaurant was a turning point in the development of my essay. At that point, my essay stopped being a nice memoir and moved to gritty cultural criticism.

Another author who influenced "Renaming Oriental Avenue" is Shari Caudron. Caudron's "Befriending Barbie" impressed me with its candor. Despite her discomfort with collecting Barbie dolls and with the average perky collector, she doggedly investigated people and merchandise at a Barbie convention. Caudron was not quickly won over, and expressed her many negative thoughts about "this sort of thing, doll collecting" (62). On the other hand, Caudron changed over the course of the essay from a Barbie cynic to a Barbie owner a "teeny bit proud of my new acquisition," a Malibu Barbie (71). The flow of "Renaming Oriental Avenue" is similar in that while at the beginning I am puzzled about the Oriental/Asian controversy, through research and meditation I realize a peace about a foreign concept.

I envisioned "My Grandmother's Eyes" during my first creative nonfiction writing class. My journal lists four memories that I have of Grandma Cristina: she gave me a glass of water, she caught me in disobedience, she comforted me when I grieved, and she passed away. I hoped to write a memoir about these events, but the requirements of the course assignments did not allow for what I had hoped to do. However in the second writing class, Dr. Viola assigned a hypertext narrative: "For a subject, pick a theme, item, person, pet, activity, hobby, body part, etc." Grandma was in. By the time I had finished the assignment, I had completed about eight pages in five sections. Each section began with an applicable quote and presented a different memory. My project, as I explained to Dr. Viola and the class during the workshop, was all about the text, but I did arrange it as a simple website to fulfill the requirements of the project. When I submitted the text to the Maier Writing Award committee in spring 2009, I was rewarded

with an Honorable Mention for Graduate Nonfiction Prose. This essay required the least rewriting, although I added more details, clarifications, and a section titled “Merry Eyes.” The essay had appeared increasingly dark, almost morose, when read from beginning to end and did not accurately reflect my grandmother’s liveliness and sense of humor. “Merry Eyes” completes the essay by separating two emotionally heavy vignettes with a light moment, thus expressing a better balance of my grandmother’s personality. I had originally considered adding “Merry Eyes” as part of “Christmas: A Journey,” but it impeded the flow of events in the Christmas essay and worked better when the focus was on my grandmother rather than on Christmas.

“My Grandmother’s Eyes” was influenced by two essays. Lisa D. Chavez’s essay, “Independence Day, Manley Hot Springs, Alaska,” is a taut drama that I had read shortly before writing “My Grandmother’s Eyes.” Her dramatic effects are reflected in my use of the hope and innocence of youth clashing with the harsh reality of a situation. Chavez plays up her youthful optimism at moving to Alaska before she deals with racism. “Everything new astounds me,” she observes, “and everything is new . . . . I am in my own Alaska, and it is beautiful” (73). In my writing, I also stress the optimism of youth before facing the crashing blow of a sudden death in my family: “Still, I am very pleased to see them, very glad to have them to dinner. . . . I do not question the event” (23). Later, when my mother realizes that she has not ordered flowers, I write, “A wedding was the only possible reason for flowers . . .” (24). I never considered the possibility of a funeral.

In addition, I took inspiration from Chavez’s anchoring her age in her essay. Chavez notes that she is twelve during the time of the essay. She repeats her age seven times to stress that she is a child and to build tension. Although I tried to use my age to build tension in “IV: Unexpected Visit,” the technique was ineffective in my case, possibly because the section is

much shorter than Chavez's essay. However, I became more aware of time during each segment, and I strengthened the mentioning of my age in each section to give a better sense of the progression of my relationship with my grandmother.

"Life in Motion," by Nicole Lamy, was also a source of inspiration. Lamy writes about her search for the twelve houses in which she lived that she photographed to give as a gift to her mother. While I only visited the past in my mind, both essays are a sequence of events that are bound together like Lamy's photograph album. Each of Lamy's brief sections are stand-alone pieces, but unified by the theme of moving. Similarly, I fashioned "My Grandmother's Eyes" as largely individual pieces tied together by communication between my grandmother and me that is mainly a visual rather than verbal connection. Arranging my essay in this way strengthened another similarity between the two essays: Lamy's moving to different homes gives her insight into her relationship with her mother. By tying my essay together, I drew a connection between my grandmother, my father, my son, and me.

"Room in My Heart" could be the essay that changed the most as far as deviation from the original course project. The assignment was: "Choose a myth, fairy tale, or other well-known story and use it as the general motif or plot to reflect on a real-life situation. You may elect to alter, change, or subvert the tale." In the first class that I took, I considered writing a memoir on adoption. I had a rough and brief outline for a children's book on adoption, based on concepts that I have explained to my children, since we are a family touched by adoption. When I Googled "adoption, fairy tale," the children's book The Red Thread: An Adoption Fairy Tale, by Grace Lin, popped up. The book is a beautifully illustrated story, warm and touching. I referred to Lin's story in my original essay and Powerpoint presentation. However, when I began to edit "Room in My Heart," there were two major problems. First, the reference to The Red Thread

seemed awkward and contrived. I was not able to smoothly integrate quotes from this delightful book into my essay. Second, the format of my essay was basically flawed. I began with a recent photograph of my family. After Dr. Viola suggested that I might have begun in the wrong place, that is, at the end of the story, I spent time rethinking my format. “Room in My Heart,” like “Christmas: A Journey” benefitted from a mostly chronological telling, with a few flashbacks, to build suspense. To improve the quality of the story, I moved the description of a recent photograph to the end of the memoir and began with an older photograph, one before my husband and I pursued adoption, one that hangs on a wall in our home. Beginning with the older photograph anchored my family’s mood before adoption and the structure of the memoir improved considerably when I framed the essay with descriptions of two photographs.

In addition, “Room in My Heart” was in danger of becoming somewhat sentimental and, as Michael Steinberg warns in “Finding the Inner Story in Memoirs and Personal Essays,” too focused on the outer facts and neglectful of the unseen facts. Steinberg writes:

You’re probably thinking, here comes another endorsement of those confessional narratives—the ones that give creative nonfiction a bad name. Actually, one of the reasons why I think we’re seeing too many of those pieces is because a lot of nonfiction writers are narrating only the literal story of their experience, and leaving out the “inner story”; that is, the story of their thinking. (438)

The “inner story” is my struggle to mentally and emotionally come to terms, not with adoption in general, but with me becoming an adoptive parent. I struggled to answer questions honestly to prepare for a major life change.

When I was working through my revision of “Room in My Heart,” Dr. Viola advised me to read creative nonfiction pieces that dealt with family crises, to generate my own ideas of how to rework my memoir. Happily, two essays detailed family issues and thus influenced my memoir. The first essay that I read, “The Unwanted Child,” was particularly touching because the essay dealt with an unplanned pregnancy. Mary Clearman Blew’s essay was mainly an inspiration in that she deals with the weight of family opinion when she decides to continue her education during pregnancy, and later while caring for her child. She describes her in-laws increasingly hostile arguments that she should leave college and settle for a job. Blew juxtaposes their point of view with her mother’s and grandmother’s equally adamant argument for continuing college. She weaves in her mother’s struggles to raise her, to fulfill Blew’s educational and health needs in the years before she entered college. Through Blew’s exploration of the raw emotions of others, I was better able to navigate a portion of my essay in which I deal with negative reactions from family and friends. As I rewrote my memoir, I expanded on my passage containing arguments against adoption, but rather than just reporting harsh comments, I answered them. My answers expose the negativity that I faced for what it was: resentment that I am choosing a different way than the questioners. Finally, my internal reactions to conflict superseded my external responses.

In the essay “My Father Always Said,” Mimi Schwartz revisits the conflict of culture with her father, Arthur, a Holocaust survivor. A family trip to Arthur Schwartz’s hometown in Germany allows him to tell his story and to rethink his memories while Schwartz better understands how her father lived and what he survived. In a similar way, I question and learn about a culture, the culture of adoption, that I thought I understood because I viewed many adoptive families from the outside. In my essay, I also explore the give and take between my

children and me as we come to an understanding of where we were as a family and how adding a genetic stranger would make a difference in our lives. The lessons continue to this day.

I come from a family of story-tellers. I have heard tales all my life from my parents, my aunts and uncles, from neighbors and friends. And I have read narratives most of my life, from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Jane Austen, from J. D. Salinger and Ernest Hemingway. Although the authors whose works I read were mostly known for their fiction, they drew characters, settings, and conflicts from life experiences. When I encountered creative nonfiction, I learned to relate actual events with the feel of fiction. But whether composing fiction or nonfiction, good writers strive for a reader to feel he or she has been there. In a letter to his father, Ernest Hemingway wrote:

You see I'm trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not just to depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing. You can't do this without putting in the bad and the ugly as well as the beautiful. Because if it is all beautiful you can't believe in it. Things aren't that way. (1)

And now, I have written some stories. While some sections portray the difficult, painful side of life, some parts are quite beautiful. I hope that the reader feels she or he has lived my stories. For me, writing them was worth the wait.

## **MY GRANDMOTHER'S EYES**

### **I**

#### **PERCEPTIVE EYES**

“The eyes are the mirror of the soul.” Yiddish Proverb

It is said of some people that they hold court from a particular chair or place in a room. My grandmother benevolently ruled from any chair, any room, any place she went. At any family gathering, whether or not she intended to be the center of attention, she was.

What was it about my grandmother that people found attractive? Her eyes drew people to her. Light blue and framed by curly, dark brown hair, her eyes were the centerpiece of her face, not because they were unusually beautiful, but because they were more expressive than any language.

“Look into my eyes,” she would tell someone in melodic Sicilian. And they would look, were compelled to look, mesmerized by her blue mirrors, but she would also look back, searching, weighing, evaluating the expression and words from another person’s eyes. Was a child lying or telling the truth? Was an in-law faithful or straying? Was a merchant resisting her bargaining skills or bending?

The eyes reflect what is inside someone’s heart and display thoughts and intentions for others to see. My grandmother was very adept at reading the eyes of others. But, I could read her eyes, as well.

## II

### COMMUNICATION

“It is better to trust the eyes rather than the ears.” German Proverb

I am four. I run into my grandparents’ kitchen from the dining room, past the refrigerator, to the large high porcelain sink. I am too small to see into the sink, but I know that if I turn the faucet, I will be rewarded with a cool drink. I reach for a glass in the cabinet above the sink, impossibly far above my head. I know even with my determination, I need help. As I consider balancing precariously on a kitchen chair, perhaps placing the chair on the kitchen table, I hear a step behind me. I turn. My grandmother, Grandma Cristina, is eyeing me suspiciously. I am her namesake, although my name—“Christine”—is Americanized. Dad, ambitious for me long before I was born, would not allow a foreign sounding name to interfere with my future. Grandma calls me by name and asks me a question, but I do not understand.

“I want a glass of water,” I tell her with childish confidence. Grandma denies me little. She says something again, her eyes look confused, but I do not understand her. Why can’t I understand my grandma who loves me?

“Water, Grandma. I want water,” I repeat loudly, pointing to the sink. Grandma is old. Perhaps she does not hear well.

“Oh. *Acqua*,” she says.

I do not understand, and I do not know what to do.

Grandma points to the refrigerator. “*Latte?*” she asks, her eyes smiling. I am puzzled. Grandma sees the confusion in my eyes. Her eyes are warm and encouraging. She opens the refrigerator and takes out an old-fashion glass milk bottle, a paper cap on top, beads of condensation dripping down the sides. She holds the bottle out so that I can see her offering.

When I decide something, I do not change my mind, even if it means drinking plain water rather than rich milk.

“No, *latte*,” I answer, arms akimbo, stamping my little foot, “*Acqua!*”

“Oh,” Grandma says, her blue eyes wide, her arm raised imperiously emphasizing my demand, “no *latte! Acqua.*” She walks briskly to the sink, obeying my order. I hear Grandma pour cold tap water into a glass. She bows slightly, in deference to royal command. Then the glass is in my hand, cool and dripping. I take a deep drink and smack my lips appreciatively.

“Ah. *Acqua*,” I tell her. Her eyes smile, but she suppresses a chuckle.

We were in two different worlds, but my grandmother lovingly invited me into her world, even if only for a few minutes. We could not communicate well in words, but we could read each other’s eyes.

### III

#### TRANSGRESSION IN THE GARDEN

“An animal will always look for a person’s intentions by looking them right in the eyes.”

H. Powers

My grandmother dotes on my grandfather. Papa Peter, my grandfather, dotes on my grandmother, but his garden is a close second. The garden, in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, is a much smaller replica of the garden he had as a younger man in “the old country,” as people tell me; that is, in Sicily. The garden is “L” shaped, about fifteen feet wide and twenty feet long. It sits at the bottom of a long, sloped driveway between my grandparents’ home and a neighbors’ house. The driveway curves around to a two-car garage under my grandparents’ home and also to the neighbors’ garage. The garden faces the lower end of the driveway.

It is summer, and I am eight years old. My sister, Ginny, my cousin Patty, and I go into my grandparents' backyard to play. We have a ball and a jump rope or we might just play tag, but we run down the driveway on a warm, sunny day, enjoying the cool air in the shade of my grandparents' home and the breeze we create from running. We stop at the bottom of the driveway to admire my grandfather's garden.

The garden is bursting with life from late spring through fall with green peas and pumpkins, tomatoes and eggplants, zucchini and a grape vine that trails luxuriously over the steel chain-link fence that marks the back of Papa Peter's yard. The most unusual occupant of Papa Peter's garden is a tree, small by tree standards, about twenty feet tall. The tree is notable because it is a fig tree. While dried figs are readily available in Brooklyn supermarkets, fresh figs are rare, expensive, and often spoiled.

However, Papa Peter's figs are renowned. The adults speak of his figs in hushed voices. Friends visit in season hoping for one sweet fruit. The figs are a satisfying reminder of Sicily to those who had left, but still a treat for those who are American-born.

Now that I am grown, I only remember having one fig from Papa Peter's tree when I was a senior in high school. The fig might have been a reward because I would graduate at the end of the school year, but I am sure that the fig was ripe in September. It was small, and fresh, the black-brown skin firm to my teeth, the flesh pale yellow and pink, tender and melting, sweet, the small black seeds, crisp. I would have liked another, but I dared not ask.

On that summer day when Ginny, Patty, and I first admire the garden, we stand firmly on the concrete driveway, just looking, innocently appreciating, just peeking at the healthy green plants, the pendulous fruit, the warm and rich scent of loam, the heady smell of vigorous green stalks, the stalks tied with rag ribbons to straight wooden stakes lined up like soldiers. Lazy

bumblebees, their pollen baskets full, wend their way from plant to plant in the neat, inviting garden.

If a weed ever lived in that garden, I never saw it. The mound around each plant is mulched with hay, but Papa Peter vigorously pulls every intruder as if to dare another to appear in its place.

I do not remember who took the first step into the garden, probably me. My cousin Patty never did anything wrong. Never. My sister Ginny was not so clean, but often waited for me to plunge headlong into mischief first.

All three of us place at least one exploratory foot in the garden and point our toes toward the fig tree. When a window slams open behind us, we turn as one. Grandma leans out of her bedroom window, and her eyes firmly fix on us. Despite Grandma's rapid Sicilian, which I do not understand, I do not need Patty, who speaks Sicilian fluently, to translate into English. Grandma's flashing eyes, forty feet away, convey the message to me: we are in deep trouble.

"*Madonne!* Grandma is mad!" Patty cries, translating rapidly as we fly up the driveway, knowing there is no place to hide. My grandmother's eyes follow me in my mind, up the driveway to the front of the house, warning, warning, warning me. I try to block out the sight of Grandma's eyes, but they are emblazoned in my mind.

To this day, I can still see them.

I do not remember any punishment resulting from our temptation. My grandmother must have told my dad, her eldest and favorite son, about our transgression. I have a vague memory of my dad crouched down and carefully, gently, explaining the sanctity of the garden. His eyes were blue like Grandma's, firm like Grandma's, searching mine, like Grandma's. We never went

into the garden again unless invited. Never. Grandma's eyes would not let us forget our error. Even when she was not there.

#### IV

#### UNEXPECTED VISIT

“Tears are nature's lotion for the eyes. The eyes see better for being washed by them.”

Christian Nevell Bovee

The day in early June was warm and pleasant. I am almost, but not yet, twelve.

I do not remember how I learned that Grandma Cristina and Papa Peter would have dinner with us, a rare event. Once, my mother served wine in her treasured crystal wine glasses, wedding gifts from friends. Papa Peter did not toast. He blessed our family. Unfortunately, to seal the deal, he slammed the fine goblet on the floor, its gentle tinkle echoing. Mom truly liked Papa Peter. However, she did not forget. The crystal glasses remained behind firmly closed cabinet doors, like pursed lips, and Grandma and Papa Peter had not been guests since.

Dad is not home from work. A New York City police sergeant, he works shifts, so his absence at dinner is not unusual. But Dad's absence makes my grandparents' presence even odder. Still, I am very pleased to see them, glad to have them to dinner. My grandmother's eyes glow, delighted to visit Ginny and me. I do not question the event.

We have dinner in the dining room, an occurrence in itself. The dining room was reserved for adults and only on holidays; at those times my cousins and I ate in the kitchen. I feel grown up and special because I would have dinner under the bright chandelier, on the brocade-covered, caned chairs. Ginny, my younger sister, and I bustle from the kitchen to the dining room, setting the table with silver, but with everyday glasses, and transporting filled plate after plate. We carry dinner plates of pasta and meatballs; sliced Italian bread; casserole dishes of

large meatballs stuffed with a hard-cooked egg, salami, and provolone; and beef ribs dripping with homemade sauce. Grandma Cristina's eyes smile appreciatively. We have everything we need and then some. Mom is a nervous hostess but never a stingy one.

Finally, we are seated around the table, Mom at one end, in front of the china cabinet with the firmly closed doors. Grandma is to Mom's right, Papa Peter next to Grandma. Ginny is next to me and between Mom and me. Although I never remember Mom or Dad giving thanks for a meal, Papa Peter blesses the food. Grandma closes her eyes reverently and bows her head. When Papa Peter's voice stops, just as I expect Mom to offer Grandma a loaded serving plate, Mom throws back her hands, exasperated.

"I forgot to order the flowers," she moans in English, her head dropping to her hand. She looks tired and harried. As my grandmother pins her eyes on Mom and asks my mother a question in Sicilian, probably an inquiry into my mother's distress, I perk up. While we grew roses, chrysanthemums, Chinese lanterns, four o'clocks, and lilacs in our backyard, buying flowers was a luxury beyond imagination.

"Is someone getting married?" I ask, bouncing on my chair, trying to restrain my excitement. A wedding is the only possible reason for flowers, and I hoped my as-yet-unmarried uncle has found a bride.

"Oh," says Mom, looking annoyed, looking spent, "you don't know. Aunt Anita died."

Shock rocks me. My only previous experience with a death in my family was five years earlier. My mom's mother suffered an agonizing death by cancer, her green eyes becoming more sunken and strained, the whites of her eyes turning more yellow each day that Mom, Ginny, and I stayed with my maternal grandparents.

Aunt Anita was not my favorite aunt, but she had always been there, not a rock, but a comfortable chair in the background. My aunt's death was tragic and quick. She unknowingly took an over the counter drug that clashed with her prescription medicine. Now she was gone.

I put my head down and sob. My aunt left Uncle Benny, my mom's younger brother, with four children under the age of twelve. While my parents went to comfort my uncle and to help with the children and the arrangements, my grandparents had come to stay with Ginny and me tonight, Mom explains loudly, over my weeping.

As I cry, I hear my grandmother's voice quiet, but urgent, and my mother answering, undoubtedly explaining why I had collapsed at the table. I lift my head when Grandma says my name. She murmurs sweet, gentle words, trying to comfort me from across the table, from her part of the world.

I remember her eyes the most, warm and compassionate, yet full of strength. I know that she saw death many times, including the loss of her three infant daughters, cherubic-looking blonde haired, blue-eyed girls. Mom has told me Grandma's advice to her when my cancer-stricken grandmother died: "You have to cry until all the tears come out." Good advice indeed for my stoic mother. Good advice for me, her stoic daughter.

I drew strength from my grandmother's eyes. She was not a mere survivor. She thrived, bursting with good humor and love for her family and friends. For me. I knew her love, not through words, but through her eyes.

I pull myself together. My family needs my help.

## V

### MERRY EYES

“There is a road from the eye to the heart that does not go through the intellect.”

G. K. Chesterton

On Christmas Eve, I am thirteen years old, just old enough to wander over to the adults at Grandma’s over-sized dining room table. The table easily sits twelve people but can be pressed into service for more. The table is crowded with my aunts and uncles. I lean on the large heart-shaped back of Mom’s chair, as Grandma begins to open her presents. Her children pooled money to buy the gifts.

The first present is a large box, covered with beautiful foil paper, silver and green. A red velvet bow wraps its ends around the box, like arms wrapped around Grandma. Grandma murmurs, running her hand over the fine paper, admiring it, and at the same time lamenting the cost.

“It’s too much!” she insists in Sicilian. Her daughters reassure her, her sons beg her to hurry and open the box: the suspense is killing them, they tease. She smiles and laughs. When she opens the box, and parts the tissue paper, she lifts a large black leather purse, a pocketbook as it was called when people had time for three syllables instead of only one. She grins, her eyes shining, but then, worried about the expense, her eyes dim. My dad, standing to Grandma’s side, lifts the bag from his mother’s worn hands and opens the pocketbook wide. He leans over the table and in an auctioneer’s rapid patter, coaxes everyone at the table to put money in the purse for good luck. He alternates between English and Italian, encouraging the generous who add paper bills, reprimanding those who give Grandma only coins.

“Okay, Jerry! More, more. Good,” Dad approves. “C’mon, Charlie! What are you doing? It’s Mom! Get out your wallet! Put in some real money,” Dad teases.

At first, Grandma is puzzled, her eyes screwed up. Then, as Dad switches to Italian, her eyes light up and she chuckles then laughs, the expressions on her family’s faces adding to her amusement.

But the fun is not over. When the laughter dies down and the handbag is placed beside Grandma, Aunt Margie offers Grandma a second box. The second box is also beautifully wrapped, smaller than the first package, but still inviting. Grandma gingerly peels back the paper, perhaps to save it for a remembrance of the evening, and lifts the white box cover. She lifts the pure white tissue paper, looks inside, and blushes. I have never seen my grandmother blush, but there it is. She composes herself, her eyes moving rapidly, not exactly sure what to fix on. She tries to close the box, while Dad reaches into it and lifts out panties, very large panties. Grandma closes her eyes and blushes more while Dad holds up the still tagged panties like an award. But when Dad holds the delicate unmentionables from each hand and stretches the pale lavender underclothes, exaggerating their girth, even Grandma erupts in laughter, tears streaming down her cheeks.

My grandmother always loved a good joke, even when played on her, and her eyes sparkled and rolled when she laughed. In addition to teaching us love of family and respect, hospitality and compassion, Grandma gave the gift of laughter.

## VI

### FAMILY EYES

“What we learn only through the ears makes less impression upon our minds than what is presented to the trustworthy eye.” Horace

Grandma is short, but not petite. While her legs, or what shows below her dress, are slim and shapely, her waist is quite large. The figure fifty inches comes to mind. Like Queen Victoria. Her doctor told her to throw away her frying pan. But she did not. Although she and Papa Peter favored fish and fresh pasta, deep frying turned their healthy Mediterranean diet into a coronary catastrophe.

I am fourteen. It is February. The past year has been awful. My mom’s father has been hospitalized for months. Mom has spent every day at the hospital, coming home late, after a long train ride from a dangerous part of Brooklyn. Day after day, I have come home to an empty house after school. It is my sophomore year, yet my first year in Sheepshead Bay High School, so I do not know many students. My sister has gone to a friend’s house each day after school, but I am older. I am old enough to stay by myself, but I am not old enough to like it.

Dad had been angry. He did not like Mom traveling alone into that part of Brooklyn. It was dangerous. And at night by herself on the subway in that part of Brooklyn. She did not drive, and he had to work. He could not understand why Mom’s brothers did not help, why they rarely visited Grandpa and did not stay long when they did visit, why she alone carried the burden, the responsibility of sitting with my grandfather, of caring for him.

Mom’s brothers had jobs, too. They could not take off. They visited when they could. Her brother, Benny, was in Jersey and he was alone with the kids. She didn’t have a job. We could manage for a while. Dinner was late sometimes, but it was on the table every night.

Then, the problem ended. Grandpa died. But Grandpa was not like Grandma Cristina. Grandpa had angry eyes. He only loved his wife, and when she died of cancer, no one met his standards.

Grandma Cristina had a heart attack. I do not remember anyone telling me that she had a heart attack. She is home from the hospital but not well. Dad wants me to visit. I want to go. I do not want to go. I am afraid. I have lost too many people in too short a time, my kindly maternal grandmother, my comfortable aunt, and my angry grandfather. I know I could lose Grandma. I do not want to go, but I go.

I do not remember the drive to Grandma Cristina and Papa Peter's house. Dad and I must have talked. We always did talk. We are Italians. Talking is what we do. Usually, Dad would turn on "WINS, all news all the time" and play the station softly while we chatted until the financial news.

"*Aspitta!* Wait a minute. I have to hear the stock market report," he would interject urgently, interrupting our conversation and turning up the radio's volume. I understood the words "up" and "down," but little else. I could always tell if the report was good news or bad news by his exaggerated reaction. Now, I suspect his reaction was for my benefit.

I do not remember the ride to Grandma's house, a twenty-minute drive from my own home, too far to walk, and, as I had learned a few years before, a long bicycle ride. In one of our more dangerous adventures, Ginny, my younger sister, and I rode to visit Grandma, narrowly circling a half dozen police cars, sheltering a dozen officers with service revolvers drawn and resting on the patrol cars' roofs, pointing at the door of a small bank. I overheard later that there was a bank robbery in progress, a fact I suspected as we rode past the scene. That was the first

time I saw the risk I had brought on my younger sister with my impetuous ride, the risk in life itself.

When Dad and I enter Grandma's house, the door unlocked during the day for guests, we cannot find Grandma at first. She is not in the dining room or the kitchen. We turn back toward the dining room when we hear Grandma call to us from the living room. Dad goes first, his broad shoulders blocking my view. When I move to his left, I have a clear view of Grandma. I burst into tears. Her steps are slow. She leans heavily on a cane, dark wood, curved handle, thick rubber tip on the bottom. Her eyes tell me everything else: her pain, her worries, her sorrow. She would not live to see me graduate from high school. Though the youngest of four sisters, she would not have the joy of family weddings, of the births of great-grandchildren.

Grandma moves toward me, puts her arms around me, and speaks gently. I do not understand one word, but I see everything in her eyes.

Grandma passes away soon after. Dad is called to her bedside. I only know that she is gravely ill.

I do not remember anyone telling me that Grandma died. No one had to tell me.

When Dad comes home, I am in my room, reading and half-heartedly doing homework. He plods up the stairs, sounding old, weary. He turns at the top of the stairs, toward his room. As he passes my room, I can see his eyes.

I have never seen my father cry. Men in his generation did not weep. If they began to cry, the weight of their generation's troubles, the Great Depression, World War II, prejudice against their kind, would never allow their tears to cease. Some problems are beyond solving and can only be endured. So I did not see Dad cry.

But his dear blue eyes are bloodshot and pained. As he passes my room, I cry. I cry for my grandmother, I cry for my dad, and I cry for me.

\*

More than ten years later, my first child is born in joy and in sorrow. Kevin is my first child and he is healthy, perfect. But Kevin is born one year, almost to the day, after Dad's sudden death at age fifty-four, the timing both a comfort and a trial.

Despite my dark brown eyes and my husband's light brown eyes, many members in both our families have light eyes. Kevin is born with light blue eyes, like my grandmother, like my father.

When Kevin was a few months old, one of my aunts hesitated before she spoke. "He looks like your dad and your dad's mother. You can see it in the mask around his eyes."

More than twenty-five years later, my aunt's observation is still true. In my son's face, I see my grandmother's eyes.

## CHRISTMAS: A JOURNEY

Our Christmas tree is packed away in the garage. My living room is back in good order. I cannot bear to take the wreaths off the front doors. Not yet. I will have to soon. It *is* almost February. A dish of peppermint and spearmint hard candies remains on the kitchen table. I will replenish the cheerful red-and-white and green-and-white discs from time to time until the bags are empty. I need to put aside Christmas and get on with daily living, but I do not find that change easy. I have too much history behind me, too many memories to just shut off the video feed streaming through my head. Filled with my family and our traditions, both past and present, my mind and heart are too full to turn off the past.

Because my husband, Jim, and I come from different traditions, we had to meld our expectations about how to celebrate Christmas. This reforming of ritual is a basic challenge of most marriages, but we had an extra complication. While I was raised Roman Catholic in a boisterous Italian-American family, Jim was raised Jewish and celebrated Chanukah with few family members around in daily life. However, he loved my family's way of enjoying Christmas, of enjoying each other, and that love made joining our two families into one much easier.

\*

When I was growing up, somewhere between Jackie Kennedy's renovation of the White House and Pat Nixon's red-coated walk through Beijing, my family celebrated Christmas in an elaborate and energetic way. When I say "Christmas," I mean Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve with Dad's large Italian family was an essential part of my Christmas, and Christmas was the highlight of my year. Christmas Eve was like a block party moved inside because of the cold. Each year, at least twenty-five family members plus a group of extended family and close friends were packed into my grandparents' small apartment, the overflow rising up the interior stairs to

Aunt Margie and Uncle Jerry's apartment to escape the heat and noise for a few minutes and to bring down yet more food. My family welcomed everyone and my cousins often brought guests.

Unlike my cousins who attended Roman Catholic parochial schools or public schools in Bensonhurst or other Italian-American areas of New York City, my sister, Ginny, and I attended public schools in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. My friends did not celebrate Christmas and their families did not allow them to join my family, so Ginny and I never brought a guest until the Christmas that I was sixteen.

My first guest was the first young man who I dated. *A boy. A young man. The tomboy brought a date.* I heard murmurs as I moved into my grandparents' home. *That's him. That's Jimmy. He's so tall! Jimmy. He's cute. They look good together. Jimmy.* My family was wide-eyed and crowded the door more than usual when Dad led the way into Grandma Cristina and Papa Peter's apartment. I smiled and hugged my way along the receiving line, introducing Jimmy as I went. Everyone, from Papa Peter who spoke little English, to my youngest cousin, who could not speak at all, had to meet Jimmy.

Meeting a guest is vital in my family. Grandma Cristina taught us that someone was only a guest the first time they came to our home. On the second visit, a guest became part of the family. The line between family and friend was blurred. As a result, our family has many life-long friends. When I was thirteen, for example, I had walked down the receiving line hugging each person as I went. I came to a young woman with whom I was not acquainted. I had not recognized my great-aunt when I was eleven years old and my aunts had gently chided me. I was determined not to make a faux pas again. I knew the young woman was family or friend or she would not be in the room, so I hugged her. She chuckled. "This really is a friendly family! I'm getting hugged by people I don't even know!" I was told she was my cousin Phyllis' friend and

to this day, I do not regret welcoming her. She is still family. And when Jimmy came into the room, he hugged as much as he was embraced. He quickly became integrated into the party. In my family, resistance to love really is futile.

Dinner was served once everyone arrived. By a ruling of the Roman Catholic Church at the time, we could not eat meat on Fridays or on holy days of obligation, like Christmas Eve. We were fasting, we were sacrificing on this holy night, this vigil remembering Jesus' birth. But somehow my family did not quite absorb the concept of self-denial. We sat down to a groaning table of fish, seafood, pasta, and sweets. My family, like most Sicilian-American families, celebrated Christmas as the Feast of the Seven Fishes. Although we did not have every type of sea creature each year, my family surpassed the expected number until the rule changed.

The first course was linguine piled high with a whole lobster on top. Both the pasta and shellfish were covered in steaming, homemade marinara sauce. The lobster, its black eyes and long antennae still attached, was roasted and red. Everyone had a filled plate that could have fed two people. A 1-to-1-¼-pound lobster was considered optimal. In that size range, the lobster was old enough to have roe, if female, but not old enough to be tough. Roe added flavor to the tomato sauce, rich with Papa Peter's home-grown sun-dried tomatoes, onions, basil, and oregano. Cayenne was added in the kitchen to my grandparents' taste. The marinara sauce was perfect, the result of loud, frequent consultations in Sicilian between my grandparents and refereed by Aunt Margie, Dad's older sister. I did not understand Italian when I was four, and I still do not, so the voices battling in the kitchen sounded angry and frightened me.

My dad took time to explain the intricacies of my grandparents' relationship. "No, Cookie. They're not fighting! They're discussing! They're explaining to each other." I understood that it is okay to disagree, even with people that you love. After Dad's explanation, I

never worried about my grandparents' animated discussions. When I was older, I understood that most of the discussion centered around cayenne. While Papa Peter wanted to add more red pepper to the sauce, Grandma said there was enough.

Age was not a barrier to the meal. Everyone, except for the very youngest child who would share a tail with her or his mother, had an entire lobster. At the children's table, where Jimmy and I sat even at the advanced age of sixteen, my young cousins were blanketed in large sturdy napkins, carefully fashioned from Grandma's old tablecloths. The napkins were an array of floral, striped, and solid damask, richly colored, over-sized, and thick. Mom and Aunt Pat would help the children navigate the difficulties of eating sauce-covered lobster in the shell with a nutcracker and fork, instructing and cracking shells when help was needed.

*Eating the tail is the easy part*, I explained to Jimmy, who had never eaten a whole lobster. *Pick up the nutcracker next to your plate, keeping the napkin close. Crack the lobster tail with the nutcracker several times, bending the base of the tail to remove it from the body. Wipe your hands. Insert your fork into the tail, opposite the three fins at the tip of the tail, and, if done right, the tail meat slides out of the shell in one piece.* A fork, and the quick slash of a knife, moves the sweet, white meat, spicy from tomato sauce and moist from the plate, to the mouth. *Mmmm!* Alternate bites of lobster with a twirl of saucy linguine, wiping the steaming sauce from lips and hands. *When the tail is finished, the claws are still full of white lobster, covered by a pink membrane. Break the claws in several places to remove the shell.* Thin clear juices flow out.

Some meat is attached to a thin piece of cartilage that works the "thumb" of the claw. Young children, and some adults, pause at this point to work the claw and watch the thumb move. There is tolerance and mercy for playing with food, because, after all, it is Christmas.

When the claw meat is consumed, only the walking legs remain, a challenge and a reward for the persistent.

While we ate, Christmas music from a local radio station played in the background. After initial hunger pangs were eased, there was laughter, peals of laughter, not just from the children's table, but from the adult table, too. During a break in the laughter, Dad asked Uncle Paulie to toss him a chunk of Italian bread. When Uncle Paulie stood up to throw the crusty bread Uncle Charlie jumped up to block, feigning a football game that broke out at dinner. Uncle Paulie dropped back, almost to Grandma Cristina's china cabinet, the dishes shivering in fear.

"Go long, Paulie! Go long!" Dad shouted to his youngest brother, as my uncles jostled for position. New peals of laughter broke out. When Uncle Paulie passed the bread through the air and Dad received it under his arm, cheers broke out from the adults and the small fry. The game was played out on more than one Christmas. We settled down to continue eating, laughing about the moment. We never lived a moment once, good or bad, but relived it many times. I do not think that Papa Peter's homemade red wine was the source of the merriment, just a catalyst. There were disagreements, even arguments, but they were few, infrequent, and short-lived.

After the pasta and lobster, my young cousins were hustled to the bathroom to remove the homemade sauce from face, hands, and hair. While the children were freshened up, assorted seafood and fishes were spread over Grandma's dining room table—the adult table. Baked and stuffed clams, squid, sea snail, fried shrimp, steamed mussels, oysters on the half-shell, fried *baccala*, conch, Alaskan crab legs, and flounder often graced the table.

On the Christmas when I was thirteen, Papa Peter had urged me to try a black and gray morsel. "What is it?" I had grown up wary of Papa Peter's culinary taste. Just a year or two before this offer, I had found my pet rabbit, Peter Cottontail, hanging in Papa Peter's broom

closet— his pelt made into a drawstring bag. And this black and gray item seemed strangely familiar.

“*Manga! Manga!*” he had coaxed. I had placed the hunk in my mouth and had explored its taste and texture. The chunk had been chewy and slightly fishy, but almost tasteless. Papa Peter had smiled and chortled—he had transported me into his corner of the world, if only for a little while!

“What is it?” I had repeated. My father’s quiet, grim translation: octopus! I had seen one at the New York Aquarium not long before.

When Mom and Dad had spent their first Christmas together in the 1950s with my dad’s family, my mother had been shocked and overwhelmed by the profusion of ocean creatures on the table. While Dad’s family, sailors and harbormasters, originated from the coast of Sicily, Mom’s people emigrated from a hilly agricultural region. Dad and his clan had feasted. Poor Mom had eked out an *entrée* from canned tuna in olive oil. On a later Christmas, after Mom and Dad had been married a few years, she would try the bright red, antennaed crustaceans with bulging eyes and sweet taste. Still later when I was eighteen, Mom learned to cook lobsters, but killing and cleaning the lobsters was left to Dad. Since I was the oldest daughter, I was given the job of handing him each lobster and watching as he dressed the creatures.

“Poor things,” Mom moaned, as she covered her eyes.

The fish on Grandma’s table were later replaced with dessert for those who had saved room. I was sixteen before I could manage a 7-layer rainbow cookie, rich with pink, yellow, and green layers of almond paste, sandwiching raspberry jam between, and coated top and bottom with dark chocolate. I passed on the *pignoli* cookies, *cannoli*, *torrone*, and *ricotta* cheese pie. In amazement, I watched the adults. I was never hungry enough to crack open a whole nut or cut up

a luscious orange, tangerine, or apple or pop concord grapes into my mouth. I was fascinated by the way Aunt Pat, Uncle Charlie's wife, cracked open the nuts. Her nutcracker clamped on a walnut, pecan, macadamia nut, or filbert and always broke the shell cleanly in two; it would not dare do otherwise. Aunt Millie pared an apple, top to bottom in one long strip, the peel curling gracefully below the sweet fruit.

Last came strong *expresso* coffee, hot and fresh, in demitasse cups as small as a doll's china tea set. *Anisette*, a liqueur, was splashed gently into the cup, usually Uncle Jerry's favorite Christmas chore, served with good cheer and more laughter. When I was eighteen, he offered me *expresso* with a dash of *anisette* from the tall bottle filled with the clear, yellow liquid and a long, leafy branch of anisette. He smiled and chuckled. "You want a little bit, Christina? Just a little bit. In your *expresso*." Uncle Jerry and Aunt Margie, his wife, spent most of Christmas Eve cooking. After dessert, the kitchens were clean and Uncle Jerry was ready to relax and enjoy his family.

After dessert Papa Peter would reach for a deck of playing cards, first railing at their condition, hands threatening the air as he spoke. Then he would insist that Grandma produce a new deck. After scolding him for holding her responsible for the deck's appearance, she always did find a fresh package. I cannot help but think that this ritual was part of his provision as host, his gesture of hospitality. A game or two of penny ante poker followed, the smoke from Papa Peter's pipe, Uncle Charlie's cigar, and Dad's cigarette blending over the table. Good-natured arguments, teasing about cheating, provided extra entertainment, but it was more for show than real. Papa Peter's sons and sons-in-law adored him, as they loved each other. And Dad's family could not be quarrelsome, even in play, for long.

For anyone not interested in playing cards or watching the game, the lovely Christmas tree and light conversation drew my family into the living room. Papa Peter would place a freshly cut pine tree, about five feet tall in a corner of his living room, its fresh scent mingling with a fish aroma. A string of old-fashioned bubble-lights, spread among the branches, illuminated the corner. Every year, I was mesmerized by the popping of the colored liquid inside the pointy tubes. Wax and wooden soldiers, angels, and crèches from a five-and-ten-cent store mingled democratically with expensive and delicate red, blue, and yellow hand-blown glass balls from Italy. My grandparents had bought the glass balls when they were well off, but that was long ago. Silver tinsel dripped from the tips of every branch. My grandparents took time to place one or two strands of silver tinsel on the tip of each branch the old-fashion way rather than use garland. Halfway up the tree, Papa Peter tied two stout ropes. Each rope was tied to a two-inch hook firmly anchored to each wall. The ugly, taut cords against the lovely, free-form tree made an incongruous sight, and the rope seemed excessively thick for the size of the modest tree and its risk of tumbling. However, Papa Peter loved children and would not take the chance of the tree dropping on one of his grandchildren. My family's joke was that only a collapsed wall would result in a child being injured by a falling tree! That tree would stand no matter what happened. And something always happened.

At about 11:30 PM, the radio station switched to Santa mode and so did we. To the children, the elaborate meal was secondary to Santa's arrival at midnight. The last half hour was a sweet agony of waiting, waiting, waiting. In earlier years, my sister, Ginny, and I, along with our cousins, eyed the sparse presents under the tree and speculated on who would receive each gift and what was inside. Even my cousin Patty, the good one, the foil to the rest of us, joined in this important part of the evening. But the year I was sixteen, my sister, Jimmy, and I sat on the

sofa and watched my younger cousins' excitement as they circled the tree. Christina, Maryann, and Marilyn helped each other to find a package tagged with each one's name. A precious package helped a child to wait until Santa Claus arrived. But he would come.

Many years before, when my cousin Phyllis had been in third grade, I have been told many times, a row had developed between her and her teacher, a nun, about the existence of Santa Claus. Phyllis had been sent to the principal's office in disgrace for arguing with a nun and for lying. My father, the family spokesman, had been called to the school from work for the emergency. He had arrived in his New York City Police officer's uniform to learn that his favorite niece, my grandparents' only grandchild for eight years, had insisted that not only did Santa Claus exist, but that she saw him in her home every Christmas Eve!

"You can say that my niece is a brat, and I would have to agree with you," Dad had begun, "but my niece is not a liar. Santa Claus does visit her every Christmas." Phyllis, the story goes, had been vindicated and had returned to her classroom. Dad's discussion with the Sisters afterward had been heated and uncomfortable because disagreeing with nuns and priests had been dangerous territory in the 1950s.

The true identity of Santa Claus changed every year. Dad had been Santa when I was two years old, but Grandma had noticed me eying the distinctive curly black hair on his arms, visible below his rolled up sleeves. I have been told she whispered to Mom that he would not be in costume next year because I had recognized him. When Uncle Paulie, my youngest uncle, was Santa there was far less pre-Santa noise than usual. Knocking on walls and windows heightened the excitement and Uncle Paulie loved to build suspense. Phyllis became Santa when she was a young woman. How the adults explained Santa's beautiful, light blue eyes and long lashes that year, I don't remember. Several years later, we were low on options. Both Uncle Charlie and

Uncle Paulie had young children who would want to be near their dad when Santa arrived. But, I brought along Jimmy. None of my cousins knew him well enough to miss him.

*Jimmy. He's tall. Will he fit? Too skinny. Needs padding. Ask Jimmy. Maybe he could . . . Ask him. Ask Jimmy.* I only heard fragments of conversation, but I feared the worse. I knew my family's penchant for practical jokes. My pet rabbit, poor Peter Cottontail, arrived in my home and heart when Uncle Charlie had attempted to tease my dad. My dad liked animals but did not want one in our house. Dad complained that the rabbit did not just eat the grass in our small backyard, but tore out the grass by its roots, killing it. Uncle Charlie had laughed at Dad, and Peter Cottontail had ended up in Papa Peter's stew pot, apparently not returning to his mother as I had been promised. Now another family joke was beginning. My boyfriend disappeared soon after the whispered conversations.

While Santa prepared, Uncle Tony, Aunt Millie's husband, amused us with awful puns and jokes to help the time pass more quickly.

Uncle Tony: "Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side! What did one firecracker say to the other firecracker? 'My Pop is bigger than your Pop!' What's black and white and read all over? A newspaper!"

To my young cousins, Uncle Tony was as much a legend as Bob Hope, but after a few minutes, the adults were ready to sing. We sang every Christmas song we knew and improvised on the ones we didn't know—"Jingle Bells," "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer," and, of course, "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." Dad was really in his element for "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." He stood and acted out the song while singing loudly in his deep voice, throwing in a few dance steps. He was probably celebrating because *he* brought Santa Claus. After a few songs, the mood changed and we moved on to "Away in a Manger" and "Silent Night." As I led

my younger cousins in songs and Papa Peter prayed, family history was being made upstairs in Santa's private dressing room.

Shortly before midnight, Papa Peter was prevailed upon to pray for the jolly old elf's arrival. "*Santa Nicholi! Santa Nicholi!*" he intoned on his knees. He asked that Saint Nicholas visit his worthy home, because the children had been such good children, a fact that several of us strongly doubted was true in our own case. He asked for the honor of the Saint's visit, for the blessing of the Saint's visit. Shortly afterward, as my stately grandfather slowly rose from his knees and began patting each of us on the head in blessing, the room suddenly went dark. The youngest among us screamed and cried, fearing the worst.

My family went to incredible lengths to pull off their Santa Claus ruse. To distract the children from what was actually happening, the adults created multiple disruptions in my grandparents' apartment. The lights flickered on and off for several minutes, my aunts flipping light switches. Loud thumps sounded throughout the house as if the building would explode, while uncles ran outside and inside the house knocking on windows, doors, and walls. Raps on outside windows and on inside doors impossibly sounded at once. Perhaps there was some wisdom in tying up the tree because it sounded like a wall might collapse.

Suddenly, in the midst of fluctuating lights, knocks, and rapidly moving adults, Santa appeared in the flesh. Four powerful floodlights blazed as a Super 8 camera recorded the action. Santa was dressed in a red velvet suit with white fur trim, thankfully not from Peter Cottontail. Aunt Margie and Aunt Millie, shrewd shoppers, found the costume at a very good price. White hair, white beard, and shiny black boots completed the effect. Santa swiftly dispersed gifts, with help from adults not burdened with reading gift tags through bushy white eyebrows. While my young cousins greedily examined their loot, handed to them by family who actually knew their

names, Santa mysteriously slipped into the night, or at least upstairs to Aunt Margie's apartment. The deception was complete. Phyllis's boyfriends had been Santas before, but that night when Santa was led into the room, Jimmy was our first Jewish Santa Claus. That Christmas Eve became part of my family's history, relived many times.

After Santa departed to remove his costume and the wrapping paper was cleared away, we began to collect our belongings and nuclear families together. Tomorrow was Christmas, and we would all spend at least part of the day with in-laws. When we were younger, Mom would shuttle my sister Ginny and me off to the bathroom to prepare us for the twenty minute drive home.

"You'll be sorry if you don't go!" We would obey, the fragrance of Santa and Christmas still hanging about us. When I was younger, Mom zippered, tucked, and covered Ginny and me before we went outdoors. We were two stuffed, happy mummies braving the cold night air. At sixteen, I knew the drill. Jimmy helped me to put on my jacket. We hugged and kissed our way down the line to the door, while shouts of "*Buon Natale!* Merry Christmas!" echoed in our ears.

Every year, Papa Peter arranged a life-size manger scene in his small front lawn. Mary, Joseph, two sheep, and an angel who hung from a rough, open shed made an appearance shortly before Christmas. Promptly at midnight, after he prayed to Saint Nicholas, Papa Peter slipped out and placed a statue of the Christ Child in the straw-covered manger at the front of the wooden shed. One year, as we stepped out into the frigid air, several neighbors knelt and prayed before the statue of the Infant, believing that my grandfather's nativity was special, as solemn and as worthy as the manger scene at Saint Finbar's Church.

When I was younger, Mom and Dad bundled Ginny and me into the car, encouraging us to lie down and rest. The day was a long one. We snuggled in the back seat to keep warm. "Are

you comfy cosy?” Dad would ask, remembering the lyrics to “Sleigh Ride.” “Are your cheeks nice and rosy?” Dad would tease. Ginny was often asleep within minutes, but I, the elder sister, felt responsible to keep her from sliding off the seat—there were no seat belts back then.

When I was sixteen, Ginny and I shared the backseat with Jimmy. We talked over the evening and looked forward to tomorrow, Christmas Day.

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One year, as we drove home, a full moon demanded my attention—first in view, then out of sight, following outside the back window, then racing us along the side window. Memories are like that. We see a piece here, a piece there: a glimpse, a word, a sound, a feel, a familiar scent. Yet, when we delve into them, a great deal comes back, racing alongside us, chasing us, changing us, helping us to understand who we are because of who we have been. When I was growing up, Dad’s family was my life, my world. But after my sixteenth Christmas, that began to change.

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For a year or two after Jim and I started dating, we spent Christmas Eve with Dad’s family. However, with the addition of more grandchildren and steady boyfriends, Dad and his brothers and sisters decided that “we were getting too big” to practically dine together. We began to eat at home as nuclear families, and then meet together for dessert and our Santa ritual.

The first Christmas that Jim and I were married, and for eight Christmases after, we drove to Brooklyn, New York, for Christmas with our families. The first three years we drove from upstate New York, where we were completing our education, and after we moved, we flew or drove from West Virginia. The first year we drove home, we were college students half-way

through our senior year. We did not have time or money for our own Christmas tree, so we let my parents' Christmas tree be our Christmas tree.

The second Christmas that Jim and I were married was less hectic. We had adjusted. We had our degrees. We had time to think. We discussed a live tree versus an artificial tree. Papa Peter always bought a live pine tree that smelled woodsy and crisp, but they were more expensive in the long run and the shape was undependable. In the end, we bought an artificial tree, eighteen inches high for our three-room apartment. We decorated the tree with a short string of round brightly colored light bulbs. I had never seen Christmas tree lights like them, which just seemed right because we were starting a new family and new traditions. At Sears, we bought a package of colored satin balls, red, green, gold, and blue, that were so small, they had built-in hooks. We could not afford a tree topper, so I made a three-dimensional star out of a piece of cardboard and aluminum foil. While we were exploring Colonie Mall in Albany, New York, we decided to buy an inexpensive dated ornament for the tree. We found a modest satin ball printed with scenes by Currier and Ives. Perfect. The idealized snowy hillsides on the ball were much like the scenes around the Albany-Troy area each winter, but with horse-drawn sleighs. On the way to the cash register, we found a bin of deeply discounted ornaments from the previous year, when we married. We found a resin dove, molded to look hand carved. We saw it as a symbol of the peace we had found in our marriage. With the two dozen "Peanuts" ornaments that I had hand painted in the fall, the tree was densely covered. With the purchase of the dove and the Currier and Ives ball for our first and second Christmas together, we had begun our own tradition. Each year since, we have bought a Christmas ornament to commemorate an event during the year.

The third Christmas that Jim and I were married, we were broke. I worked as a waitress at a local pizzeria, my olive skin and dark hair giving the restaurant an air of authenticity among the blondes and red-heads. We bought a tree ornament depicting a mouse in a thimble because we only had a mouse's thimble full of money. The next year, we moved to West Virginia when Jim accepted a job with Union Carbide. As we drove through the mountains of western Maryland and West Virginia, we knew "we were not in Kansas anymore."

For the next thirty years, we answered the puzzled questions people we met asked us: "You moved here from Brooklyn? Wasn't that hard?" Yes. Yes, it was. We left much more behind than an address. We celebrated having a living wage with a six-foot artificial tree and an ornament of a bear and a cardinal singing from a book of carols. The Black Bear and the Northern Cardinal are West Virginia's state animal and state bird. We were adjusting to West Virginia.

As we added children to our marriage, we added an ornament for each birth. Kevin's ornament was a teddy bear playing a drum; James' was a baby sitting in a wicker stroller, the kind only seen in museums now.

We flew up to Brooklyn each year, when Dad died, when Kevin was three months old, when James was born, and on.

The year Jim became a Christian, we added a church ornament that held a tiny Christmas tree light within. The ornament glowed like a real church in celebration. That year, we began our new tradition of reading the Christmas story from the Gospel of Matthew or the Gospel of Luke on Christmas Eve.

When Kevin was six and James was three, Jim and I made the hard decision to have Christmas at our home in West Virginia. Flying our family of four would be expensive, but the

alternative, a twelve-hour winter drive to Brooklyn, would be especially difficult with young children. We had also decided against Santa Claus, and this created some friction with family members. We had reached the point where we needed to be our own family for at least one Christmas.

The Feast of the Seven Fishes was out of the question for Christmas Eve. One cook with two high-spirited young children would mean one very large mommy meltdown. Jim graciously accepted the seriously pared down menu. I decided on lasagna for Christmas Day, but wanted to know the children's preference for Christmas Eve.

"Pizza!" they chorused.

"Pizza?" I asked. I had hoped for fried shrimp, at least.

"Yeah, pepperoni," Kevin added.

"Roni," added James, for good measure. My childhood slipped further away. Well, after all, it was Christmas and children should have their way, at least for one day anyway.

Most of our friends celebrated Christmas with their own families, so we did not have guests. Just the four of us ate our Christmas Eve dinner, pepperoni pizza, perhaps with sides and trimmings, I don't remember. I had definitely turned another corner in my life. Jim and I did not mention this change of menu to most of our family for years. By this time, Kevin was old enough to ask about opening one present before going to sleep. Jim and I allowed each child to open one package and then it was off to bed. That one precious package helped each child to wait until morning arrived. Although we had decided not to do Santa, the children still anxiously anticipated the next day's surprises and the time we would spend together. I left out only a package of colorful pajamas for each child to decorate them for the traditional photograph taken

in front of the tree on Christmas Day. This new tradition continued until my children were too old to be photographed in pajamas.

The next change in tradition began the year Luke was born. For thirteen years, Jim and I had sent out about fifty Christmas cards with hand written notes. We knew we could not do it the year we had an infant, two children in school, and church and community activities. We prayed. We brain-stormed. We bought an ornament to commemorate Luke's birth that year, a cheerful bear on a raft made from Crayola crayons, and we planned out a family Christmas newsletter. This was not a typical Christmas letter, the kind that go straight to the trash or languish in a pile until later.

The first newsletter began with the words,

Yes, Virginia, after 13 years of saying, "No newsletters!" we've thrown in the towel! After sending Christmas cards that were either too late or too short, we've decided to put the major events in a newsletter form. . . . Having an all-male chorus for accompaniment is different. Chris was with Kevin (7), James (4), and Luke (112 days) in a doctor's office. A little old lady said, "Oh, how cute, three boys." Kevin quipped, "My dad's favorite show is *My Three Sons*!" The lady riposted, "I bet Mom's glad it wasn't *The Waltons*."

Some of our friends collect their families together and read our newsletter aloud, laughing all the way. We have had written requests to send a newsletter to yet another family. One year a friend wrote a note to us on her newsletter: "You win. Yours is better!" When we started internet access, we emailed the newsletter to many of our friends. Last year's newsletter was posted to Facebook.

Our newsletters became more elaborate as time went on. For several years, I illustrated them. For a year or two, Kevin and James' art work was featured. When Kevin developed an interest in figure drawing, he began drawing composite caricatures, each family member drawn as if in costume for an event that year. We reduced the drawings and had them photocopied onto the newsletter. He continued these drawings for seven years, the last one a beautiful charcoal drawing of our family sitting snuggled together in after-Christmas repose, Luke in a playful Santa hat. The original drawing is hanging over my desk as I write, a reminder of my family and of Christmas.

Three of my children are old enough to be on their own now, so the time we spend together is shorter and more valuable. Most years, after pizza, salad, breadsticks, and a great deal of laughter, Jim, Kevin, James, Luke, Paul and I get comfortable in the living room. Our seven and one-half foot artificial tree stands before the front windows, holding one dated ornament for every year that Jim and I have been married, plus ornaments that the children made and "Peanuts" ornaments that I made before they were born. A Michelangelo inspired angel is poised on top. Red stockings and a tree skirt that I made the year Paul was born complete the tree. We hung an ornament of an angel watching over a baby in a cradle that year. A doll-size crèche sits nearby on a side table. I chose a wooden manger set even though it is only nine inches high because children can handle the pieces, think about what each piece means, and ask questions. Jim reads from the Gospel of Matthew or the Gospel of Luke, sometimes blending verses from each book together.

This year, Christmas Eve fell on Sunday, so we spent part of the evening at church, hearing our pastor talk about Christ, giving thanks for the greatest gift, singing with many more voices, all dear friends, than we do at home.

This year, only Paul was young enough to qualify for a Christmas Eve gift to open before bed. I left the must-have gifts hidden. Over the years, wagons and sleds, later game systems, even later external hard drives have remained out of sight until Christmas morning. Tomorrow, we will wait until everyone, even a guest or two, is awake and take turns opening presents, admiring, explaining, thanking, and laughing. There will be pranks—a too big box for a very small present, a gift left in another room and whisked out at the right time, gift tags with awful puns that hint at the contents. By the time the wrappings are cleared away, Jim and I will have a pancake breakfast ready. We will laugh about the gifts, plan to watch DVDs, play games, or put together a some-assembly-required present. Then, we will enjoy the day and each other.

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A few years ago, my pastor and his family visited my family. The next Sunday morning, he encouraged the congregation to enjoy life, to enjoy each other. He told the congregation about his visit to the Williams' home. "You can't get out of the Williams' house," he explained, "without a good meal and a lot of laughs."

I hope that is true, that each person who visits us is an honored guest the first time and family each time after. I hope that each visitor enjoys his or her meal and giggles, laughs, and howls at our stories and awful puns. My family gave me deep roots and showed me a way to live, a way to love others. Jim and I have appreciated what we were taught and tried to continue that atmosphere of love as we raised our own children. Although we are not blessed with twenty or thirty family members around us at Christmas, and we do not have time to cook the Feast of the Seven Fishes, even though we skipped Santa, and a life-size manger does not stand in our yard, I hope that we have captured the pure joy of loving and being loved and making memories that connect us, even when we are apart.

My cousin Maryann sent me a message by Facebook not long ago. She remembers Christmas with our extended family well and enjoys reliving the memories and watching the Super 8 films from long ago. “We were watching some old family movies of the holidays at Papa Peter’s house,” she wrote. “Everything seemed so simple and somewhat magical back then.”

Yes it did, Maryann.

Indeed it still does.

## ROOM IN MY HEART

I have two family photographs in front of me. One is quite recent, but the other is more than fifteen years old. In the older photograph, five of us are dressed in holiday clothing and grouped together in front of our Christmas tree. My oldest son, Kevin, sits to the left side of the photo, white shirt and red tie peeking out of his bright blue pullover sweater. He is in front of the tree, the ornament from the year that he was born, eleven years before, is hanging just above and behind his head. He is beginning to smile, as if about to tell a joke. James, my second son, stands at the other end of the photo, his white shirt and black-and-white abstract tie boldly standing out from his blue-and-black cardigan. He has the mischievous, elfin expression of a seven-year-old ready for fun. Son number three, my three-year-old, Luke, is next to Kevin, but sitting on my lap. He has on a black cardigan sweater and white shirt, with a jaunty red-and-green bow tie. He is grinning, his cheeks pressing his eyes closed. I have one of my hands wrapped lightly around his small hands. As often happened when we snapped a family photo, Kevin and Luke were probably trying to put “rabbit ears” and “moose antlers” behind each other’s heads, and I am silently reminding Luke that this photograph will be sent to family and friends. The *next* snapshot can be the silly one. All three boys look like they know a secret, not surprising since the photo was taken about a week before Christmas. But, my husband, Jim and I, sandwiched between Luke and James, do not appear quite so cheerful. Jim’s arms are stretched out behind all of us as if to protect us, to hold us together, to keep us close. Perhaps Jim and I are merely waiting for the camera’s timer to click and drench us with light from the flash and that may explain our half smiles. Maybe we are uncomfortable. Jim is kneeling, and I am sitting on a child’s chair. Maybe we are weary after corralling our high-spirited sons into position. But, the photo was taken one year after I had been ill. Life was beginning to look up, but I still had not completely recovered my strength and our plans for our life had been disrupted.

Even when Jim and I were dating, we talked about having four children—two dogs, three cats, and four kids. Five years after we married, before the children were born, we had two cats. But one cat, an orange tabby named Watson, died when he was six months old. Our first cat, Bathsheba, had not liked Watson, a kitten. She had been an “only cat,” a black-and-white tuxedoed princess in our home for five years, and she was not interested in gaining a companion. She was a petite seven pounds all of her life, except for the six months when Watson lived with us. Sheba gained two pounds, more than twenty-five percent of her weight, during those months. When Watson died, Bathsheba went down to her normal weight and we gave up the idea of introducing another pet while Sheba ruled. But we did not give up the idea of a family with four children.

The winter after my youngest son, Luke, turned two, I became quite sick. I caught an insignificant cold that developed into a sinus infection. The infection spread to my lungs, and for the next six weeks, my doctor prescribed a series of antibiotics to clear up the bronchitis that was alarmingly close to pneumonia. When I was finally better, my doctor advised me to consult an allergist. Within a month of my appointment with the allergist, I was on three different medications and immunotherapy, in my case, two allergy injections each week. My allergist firmly told me that my condition was as serious as someone with diabetes or emphysema, and I needed to take care of my health. Luke was three when I began allergy injections, and, about one year later, Jim and I weighed the option of a fourth child.

I asked my doctors about another pregnancy. My family doctor looked grave and discouraged me. My allergist was sure I would miscarry from the allergy injections. My obstetrician was adamant. The medication that I required was too risky for an unborn child. I

learned the meaning of the word “teratogenic” or “monster causing.” My medication was linked to birth defects. Pregnancy was inadvisable.

I went home, packed up baby clothes, toys, and equipment, and began to give all but the most sentimental items away to friends, to churches, and to charities.

“What if we have another baby?” Luke asked, as I collected his outgrown clothes. Although Luke was four, I called him my thirty-five-year-old midget rather than a pre-school student. I assured him that if we had another baby, the Lord would provide everything that we needed. After all, look at how much we have to give away, I explained. Yet I was sad knowing that I would not have another child. I knew that part of my life would end someday, but I had not expected that door to close so soon. Even if having a child was medically advisable, I was still too weak to take on such a tremendous responsibility.

After two years of injections and medication, I began to feel stronger. The aggressive treatment that my allergist had implemented improved my health considerably, but pregnancy was still out of the question. I grieved for the child I would never have, not for a few days but for many months. Grieving turned to acceptance; however the longing for another child did not go away.

At that time, my friend, Jennifer, and her husband were waiting to adopt, and so my thoughts turned to adoption. According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, “adoption” means to “legally take (another’s child) and bring it up as one’s own.” The National Adoption Clearinghouse defines adoption as:

The act of lawfully assuming the parental rights and responsibilities of another person, usually a child under the age of 18. A legal adoption imposes the same rights and responsibilities on an adoptive parent as are imposed on and assumed

by a parent when the child is born to the family. Adoption grants social, emotional and legal family membership to the person who is adopted.

The definition continues to explain that an older understanding suggests that adoptive parents are raising someone else's child. According to Census 2000, the most recent United States census available, 2.1 million adoptees of all ages live in our country, 1.5 million under 18 years of age. Some adopted children are step-children. Others are grandchildren or in some other way related to the head of household by blood, but many children join unrelated families.

Both Jim and I had contact with families touched by adoption. My aunt and uncle had adopted a six-month-old daughter when I was about twelve. Doctors had told my aunt that she could not have more children after her son was born. Although Marilyn came from a different background from me, my cousin was one of us. I played with her as I would any other cousin because, to me, there was no difference. When I married Jim, Marilyn was my six-year-old flower girl, sweetly following around Jim's nephew who was slightly older than her.

A few years after Jim and I were married, we met Roger and Jill.\* They had an infant daughter by adoption and added a son by adoption a few years later. Their friendship and openness helped me to better understand legal adoption. Jill explained her difficulty with answering questions on an adoption application. How could she know, she asked herself, what she could accept in a child? Could she accept two missing fingers, but not three?

How could any of us know our emotional strength? I wondered.

Jim and I had been more intimately included in adoption when two of our other friends,

(\* Indicates a name changed to protect a friend's privacy.)

Bill and Debbie,\* planned to adopt a second child. We often prayed with them for another child and talked about the trials and blessings of adoption. Their son was a close friend to Kevin and James, and all three boys anxiously anticipated a new playmate. Later, we cried with them when they took custody of Cecilia,\* an eighteen-month-old girl. We learned that Cecilia had been physically abused until she was removed from her birth home. I was angry when I saw her scars, but Cecilia was safe now, surrounded by loving family and friends.

Jim and I had also seen adoption from the other side when a family member released a child for adoption. Our family mourned the child who was lost to us, but circumstances did not allow the birth mother to provide a home for the child. Jim and I regretted that we were not in a position to adopt the child, a girl, but we were newly married college students dependent on scholarships and family help. We could not manage raising an infant, too.

But we were an established family now. After praying and thinking about the possibility of adoption for a few days, I broached the subject with Jim. I did not want him to feel pressured in any way. The commitment was too great. Time and money, opening our lives to strangers were complications. And then there were the unknowns, the challenges that appear after a commitment is made. Amazingly, Jim had been thinking of adoption too but was worried about my stamina. I felt stronger each day, and expected to get much better. The adoption process would take a while, so he told me to find out how to begin.

Adoption, I knew, involves many choices. There is no one right way to adopt. An adoption may be arranged four ways: first, privately, with one or two lawyers as intermediaries between a birth mother and an adoptive parent or parents; second, through a private agency; third, through a government agency; or finally, internationally. Jim and I had friends who have successfully adopted a child through each of these four paths.

International adoption was tempting. There were over one hundred and forty million orphans in the world and many are available for adoption, according to Christian World Adoption. However after a lengthy discussion, we decided against international adoption because with three children in our family, we could not afford international adoption. Adoptive parents are often required to spend several weeks in the child's country of origin, a wonderful opportunity to travel for those who choose this route, but too costly for us.

Private adoption through a lawyer could be slow, since adoptive parents wait for a child from a birth mother who contacts that particular lawyer or an associate. I called our state's public agency. The social worker kindly answered my many questions. The problem was many children were in foster care, waiting for the court to permanently release them from their birth home so the children could be adopted into a permanent home, referred to as a "forever home." Sometimes situations changed and children were reunited with their birth family. Sometimes, they waited for the continuity of a committed family. The wait for a child was more than two years. My thoughts wandered to the gestation period of an elephant: two years. Two years seemed like a very long time when I had only waited nine months for my other children. I called a private agency.

The Children's Home Society (CHS) has been in operation since 1896. The organization not only facilitates adoptions, but provides shelter or foster homes for children in need: the neglected, the abused, and the abandoned. I asked the agency to send me an application when a social worker told me that the wait was one to two years.

According to the National Adoption Clearinghouse, from 2002 through 2007, more than 129,000 children were waiting every year to be adopted. Each year, a little over 51,000 children

are adopted, more than one-third of the children available for a permanent home. Yet, more than 78,000 children wait for a “forever home” each year.

By the time Jim and I received the paperwork from the Children’s Home Society, we decided to explain to our children what we were anticipating. My children’s initial reactions to the news that Jim and I were planning to adopt were encouraging. As the youngest of three children, Luke had a fondness for anyone younger than him. He offered to share his room and insisted that we had to make a “blankie” and buy a teddy bear. This is a family tradition that Jim and I began when our first child was born. Pat, a friend, made a soft, cotton blanket for Kevin just the right size for a child in a crib. Jim bought a teddy bear and brought it to Kevin in the hospital soon after our child was born. Each succeeding child was given a blanket and a bear, chosen by the preceding sibling. By tradition, Jim bought the bear, and I made the blanket. Luke was adamant about the blanket. He could not sleep without his blanket and could not imagine inflicting such a trial on another child. I agreed to sew a blanket.

James loved the idea of a new brother or sister. He thought a brother would be cool because four boys could play together. As an avid soccer player, he thought two-on-two soccer would be fun. On the other hand, he never had a sister before and he thought that might be interesting.

“After all,” he told me, “girls have babies.” Each day for the next two years, James would remind us to pray for “the kid we adopt.” Each time I reminded him that we were praying for his new brother or sister.

Kevin’s view of adoption was more complicated. As the oldest child and an eleven-year-old, he worried. He had been down the road to a new addition to the family twice before and knew that another child meant more time, more money, and more sharing. Jim and I talked to

him alone and with his brothers present, always taking his concern seriously. Yes, another child would mean sharing what we had, but no one would be loved less. We do not divide up love.

When we have more people to love, God gives us more love to share. Our God, who multiplied a few fish and loaves of bread among thousands, could certainly provide us the love we needed for all our family and friends.

But our family had a great deal to learn, to mull over, to accept about adoption. It is one thing to know an adoptive family or to know a child who joined a family by adoption. It is quite another thing to *be* an adoptive family. Our family would never be the same. After reading, thinking, praying, and talking, Jim and I often explained the implications of adoption to our children. We explained the permanence and intimacy of adoption over a period of a week and reinforced our children's understanding over the next two years.

The application process was at times overwhelming. I had filled out many forms in my life, including applications for college and for jobs, but those mostly dealt with facts. The adoption application forms contained soul-searching questions about where I had been, where I was now, and where I was going. And I had not realized the extent to which we would expose our family to others. People sometimes misunderstand adoption costs as buying a baby, which is not accurate in the best situations. Although there are court and paperwork costs and social workers must be paid, much of the cost covers counseling fees for the adoptive family. Thinking about the questions on the application and thoughtfully answering the social workers' questions would help us to mentally and emotionally prepare for a child who was not a blood relative.

The application looked something like this through my eyes:

## National Adoption Exchange

Name: Williams Christine

Occupation: Homemaker, mother, Sunday school teacher, one of the go-to members of my church when a problem needs to be solved.

Religion: Presbyterian, formerly a nominal Roman Catholic. I never even saw a Bible until I was eighteen years old. Now I know how many people were on Noah's Ark.

Income? Savings? Good. I deeply appreciate that I am able to stay home with my children. Yes. The children will need scholarships to go to college, but we will be fine if this money-pit of a house does not bleed us.

Education? Bachelor of Arts in English from SUNY at Albany, and I am certified to teach English, grades 7-12. I may teach in a classroom someday, but right now I am focused on my three favorite students.

Would you accept: male female either

I did not know what sex my first three children would be, but I learned to love them.

Physical handicaps? No Yes Mild Moderate Severe

We have three children and stairs.

Mental handicaps? No Yes Mild Moderate Severe

I am a coward.

Behavior problems? No Yes Mild Moderate Severe

Ditto.

Sexual abuse?      No    Yes    Mild    Moderate    Severe

I have three sons. Sexually abused children would create too many problems.

Race?                      White?   Black?   Biracial?   Other?

Whatever. I am a product of integrated schools.

Drug issues?                      No    Yes    Mild    Moderate    Severe

What is your background?

Parents' marriage?    Long.

Personal background?

College, marriage, children.

Self-evaluation?        Intelligent, creative, tenacious.

Expectations?            Another child will mean keeping track of another body and another "head." I will need to spend time getting to know my child, who he/she is, what he/she likes and dislikes, what motivates him/her, what his/her dreams are. I cannot help a child whom I do not know.

Analysis of your marriage?

We work through problems, expecting a solution or, at least, progress toward a solution.

Analysis of your family life?

Love, discipline, fun.

- Hobbies? Reading, watching movies, walking. Watching *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Sesame Street* with my children. I stopped break-dancing to the *Sesame Street* theme music after I injured my back.
- Pets? Not anymore and unlikely in the future. We had a cat for sixteen years, but I have severe allergies.

\*

I was also required to submit a lengthy self-evaluation. I lingered over this requirement for several days, writing, scratching out, and rewriting, trying to be honest, but succinct. The original form was meant to be handwritten, but I finally typed the form into my own document to have greater flexibility and expand upon my situation.

1. What do you remember most about your home life when you were young?

I remember large family gatherings at holidays, birthdays, and graduations. Also, I was told that I was going to college.

2. Describe your mother and father. Include a description of their marriage relationship.

My mom is an independent, hard-working woman. She worked in her parents' grocery store whenever she was out of school. After she graduated from high school, she worked a full-time job and worked in the store for three to four hours in the evening. She is shy outside of our family circle. My dad was a born leader. He was well-liked, well-known, and an outspoken man. Mom loved Dad because he made her feel special. Dad loved Mom because she was determined and tough. Mom regretted that she had not been able to go to college as a young woman.

With Dad's support, she earned an Associate's degree when she was fifty years old.

3. What person were you closest to as a youngster? Why?

I was closest to my dad because he took the time to answer my questions. He took time to teach me to work hard and to play hard. Our personalities are similar. We are both loyal to friends, totally dedicated to pursuing what we believe is right, and outspoken. Dad died thirteen years ago and I often remember his counsel and his love. I miss him.

4. Describe your relationship with your brothers and sister when you were young and now (if appropriate).

My only sister, Ginny, is younger than me. Since my mom was the only daughter in her family (in a culture where that made a difference), she encouraged my sister and me to be friends. Ginny lives out of state, but we talk by telephone and my family visits Ginny and her family once a year.

5. What have been your most unhappy experiences?

The most traumatic experience of my life was my father's death. Losing my grandparents and watching my mom struggle with widowhood have been very painful, too.

6. Describe your family situation, your support system, extended family network and the alternatives they provide in the event of your illness or death.

In the event of my illness or death, our friends from church would undoubtedly help Jim and the children, both practically and emotionally. Our parents would come down as soon as possible, probably in less than a week. I have confidence in

Jim's ability to care for our family in a crisis because I have watched him provide for us in normal circumstances and in emergencies. Also, I believe that God will provide for all of my needs and my family's needs "according to His riches in glory" (Philippians 4:9). We have never lacked what we truly needed.

7. Describe your daily plan for the child, what arrangements you can make for day care, after school care, weekends.

I am a homemaker, so the child that we adopt will be at home with me, just as my older children stayed with me. I will care for my child and instruct him or her. When Jim and I go out in the evening, my children are only left with competent and loving friends or babysitters. If no one is available, we stay home and enjoy each other's company.

8. Describe your spouse's home life and family.

When I met Jim, I knew that I had a challenge to face. I not only had to pass inspection with his mom, dad, sister, and brother, but also I needed to befriend his cute-as-a-button four-year-old nephew and his very jealous Siamese cat. The humans learned to love me and the cat died! Jim's family is warm, loving, and fun-loving. There is often a parade of neighbors in and out of their apartment.

\*

As Jim and I filled out the paperwork, we began to tell family and friends about our plan. Reactions varied considerably. Some loved ones immediately declared approval and steadfastly supported us through the inevitable ups and downs. Many friends prayed for us and encouraged us, both friends who had adopted and those who had never considered the possibility. Patti and Ron, friends from church, volunteered to babysit our children while we attended an all-day

adoption conference in Charleston, West Virginia, a few weeks after I called CHS. Jennifer and David were waiting to adopt a second child into their family of eight, five birth children and one child by adoption. Jennifer shepherded me through the application process, encouraged me through the rough spots, and prodded me into calling the agency when I did not hear from them. During a very touching moment, our family member who had released a child for adoption many years earlier told me, “Chrissy, if I knew my child was with people like you and Jimmy, I would sleep better at night.”

Then, we faced the discouragement and disparaging remarks from family and friends.

“Why would you want another kid? You have enough,” said one friend. *“Enough” is a relative term, I thought. Some people do not want any children, while others have more than ten.*

“It’s just your hormones. Ignore it,” counseled another friend. *Maybe, I thought, but my head was in on the conspiracy.*

“You need to save money for retirement. Never mind more kids,” scolded a relative. *A worthy goal, but retirement would be more fun with four children and their families.*

“I don’t like every child. I might not like the one you get,” another relative warned. *I am raising three likeable people. The world could use another.*

“It won’t really be yours.” Ouch. That comment really hurt, and, at the same time, exposed my own ignorance about the adoption process. *Would the child really be mine?* Soon, I had some encouragement.

We began to receive an adoption newsletter through CHS in the mail. One issue included an upbeat poem by Cheryl Tillman, a portion of which held special meaning for me.

\*

## I Am a Real Mother

I am a real mother, because God has trusted me with the care of a real daughter.

I am a real mother, because when after much concentration she crossed her fingers for the first time, I made fourteen long-distance phone calls to spread the big news.

I am a real mother, because when she fell and knocked out her front tooth, I cried longer than she did.

I am a real mother, because I carry 2,428 pictures of her at all times, and am only too willing to explain how I know she is the prettiest, smartest, happiest child ever born . . . .

I am a real mother, because when she puts her arms around my neck and says, “Mommy,”

I used to say “hot fudge sundae,” and the joy and love I feel is real.

\*

After reading Ms. Tillman’s poem, I cheered up knowing that someone else believed that being an adoptive parent *is* being a parent.

I tried to answer questions and unkind remarks with reason and grace. Sometimes I just changed the subject or even walked away, too angry to be reasonable, or too hurt to be kind. The hardest comments to hear were from family. Our child would need their support and their love, forever. Sometimes I would hand the phone to Jim. He assured family members that we were pursuing a child together, but I felt like a lightning rod. Many people assumed this was my decision. After all, women have babies, not men.

Jim and I began to read books on adoption. I began to understand that my need, in itself, was not a sufficient reason to adopt. Neither, for that matter, was providing a home for a needy child. While infertility and altruism may be part of the driving force behind adoption, my

motivation had to spring from a very basic and deep desire to have and nurture a child. An adopted child is family who enters his or her parents' hearts through a different door. Although birth provides the usual path for a child to enter a family, adoption is, as social workers say, another way to build a family. I knew there was room in my heart for a fourth child, a child unrelated by genetics, but one who would become part of us.

After we submitted the paperwork, the application paperwork changed, and we were required to rewrite our application in a slightly different format. We took a deep breath and rewrote it.

During the first meeting with a social worker, we were given hard news: because we had three children, we were not eligible for an infant. I hurt to be excluded in this way from having an infant. I tried to be gracious, but their decision, like a barbed wire fence to my hopes, was a further reminder that I could not have a child. In reality, I had not finished grieving.

In addition, our social worker assured us that she and the agency understood and accepted our boundaries about what we could and could not accept in a child. Each person who saw our application had things that they could willingly accept in a child and things that would be impossible to accept. Still, I had a difficult time making these choices in advance. I had seen friends take on very difficult situations. While most of the children I know are happy and healthy, I have seen family or friends have birth children with Down's Syndrome, congenital defects, catastrophic illness. How could I know what I could bear until the unthinkable happened?

Finally, we were accepted into the roll of prospective adoptive parents, and the home study began. Jim and I were interviewed, together and separately. We were examined as individuals and asked to explain our background, how we met, our courtship, our marriage, our

present relationship with each other, with our children, with our parents, with our extended family, and with our friends. At one point, I told one of our series of five social workers that she knew more about me than my own mother.

Each of my children was interviewed separately. Although they had been included as much as possible in discussions about adoption and in the process, one skeptical social worker did not believe that we could adequately communicate the concept of adoption to such young children. She told me this just before interviewing my boys. By that time, Kevin was twelve, but James and Luke were still young. Afterward, she smilingly told me that when she asked James, then nine years old, what he thought about having a brother or sister who was a different color than him, he assured her that he did not care if his brother or sister was black or white, red or yellow, as long as he or she was not green. Luke, then five years old, confided to her that he wanted his brother or sister to live with us forever. She was pleased. The children of a family she had interviewed a few days before did not understand the process, the complications, or the permanence of adoption. My children did understand and still, incredibly, embraced it. The social worker told me that somehow, despite the fact that we had three children and would usually be ineligible for an infant, she was going to find an adoptable infant for us. Jim and I found her assurance difficult to believe. Many couples were waiting to adopt a first or second child.

When the paperwork and interviews were finished, we waited. Karen, a friend who had adopted, advised us not to get a room ready. Good advice. Several times, we thought we found our child only to have our hopes dashed. Jim and I tried to spare our children the emotional roller coaster by saving discussions about our disappointments for when we were alone.

And we waited. Kevin was learning to play the trumpet at school. He and several other students formed a Pep Band to play at soccer and basketball games. Their career ended when they played Darth Vader's theme song from *Star Wars* as a referee walked onto the basketball court.

And we waited. James reminded us each day to pray for the kid we would adopt. I reminded him that the child would not be just any kid, but his brother or sister. Again. He wanted to learn to juggle to amuse his newest sibling, so I found an instructional videotape on juggling.

And we waited. Luke and I went to a fabric store and considered all possible blankets and bindings. Because Luke wanted to teach his younger sibling the alphabet, I made a blankie, with the alphabet and spotted dogs, and edged it with wide, red binding. When I mentioned that an infant would need clothes for going home from the hospital, Luke leaned against me and asked if we could use his baseball-cap-covered stretchy, the one-piece garment that he had worn on his trip home from the hospital. We talked about bedroom arrangements. We planned activities for a new family member, if our child was four or five years old. Through the American Red Cross, I was teaching a childcare class for babysitters at this time. I used the opportunity to teach my children about childcare for infants and young children.

And we waited.

On New Year's Day, I was awake before the rest of the family. Jim and I had first talked about adoption almost two years before. Kevin was thirteen, James was ten, and Luke was six. It was unusual for me to wake up so much earlier than Jim, but I wanted to plan meals to put in the freezer after Kevin, James, and Luke went back to school. We had been promised yet another child who was due to be born in mid-January. I tried not to get my hopes up. The unborn child's birth mother expressed interest in our family. She knew that she was carrying a boy, and she

liked the idea of her son having three older brothers. We had requested several children and several sibling groups, but had been refused because of one complication or another. Also, by West Virginia law, a birth mother has three days after a child's birth to change her mind about releasing a child for adoption. However, her interest was not a commitment. The law allows for a change of heart. Just in case, I wanted to freeze meals that could just be reheated. Quick meals would be useful even if an infant did not arrive, I reasoned, trying to insulate myself from another disappointment.

At nine-thirty AM, the phone rang. My social worker did not mince words. My son had arrived. When could I come get him?

I stumbled through the next ten minutes asking questions and answering questions, overwhelmed by shock. He was two weeks early . . . two weeks! Snow storms threatened along the route we would take, and we had to take custody of our son in three days!

The boys and I spent the day rearranging furniture and belongings in three bedrooms. We moved Kevin into the former playroom and Luke into the room that he would share with James. Our baby would have Luke's former room, the one closest to my bedroom so I would hear our infant at night. We did not have time to set up a crib, one of the few baby items that I had kept, before we left for the hospital. And we hesitated to fully commit to a baby's room until we were sure our child's birth mother would not change her mind. While the boys and I rearranged bedrooms, Jim called and emailed everyone we knew to tell them Paul had been born.

\*

Six months later, the day after James' birthday, Jim and I stood before a judge, with our four children, and formally adopted Paul. We swore under oath to treat him as we would treat our birth children. Jim and I were legally parents to our fourth child. That Sunday, we had him

baptized, just as his brothers had been baptized. Paul's brothers joined Jim and me in front of the congregation as we promised to pray with him and for him, as we have prayed for his brothers. He was officially family. That will never change.

The National Adoption Clearinghouse tells about Charlotte Lopez. Miss Teen USA in 1993, Lopez had gone through seven foster care placements before being adopted at age 17. She spoke about her feelings on adoption.

Clearly, the \_\_\_\_\_ (name of foster family) never understood how important adoption was to me. They loved us. They wanted to keep us. They felt that was enough. I believe that their position was based on the notion--shared by many people involved in foster care--that adoption is pretty much an empty ritual, a bureaucratic step up from foster care with no deep meaning in and of itself. For me, nothing could have been further from the truth.

Miss Lopez makes a good point. Rituals are life-changing when someone believes in what he or she is doing, trusts in change that is embraced. The act of legal adoption forges a family together much as a wedding ceremony creates a new family. Words are not just spoken, but also promises are made to another.

I have two family photographs in front of me. While one is more than fifteen years old, the other is more recent. Our last family photograph is two years old. We decided on black shirts and jeans, clothes all six of us wear comfortably. Kevin, my oldest son towers above me at six feet two inches. He looks remarkably like me around his eyes and in his bone structure. Except for the shadow of his beard, a goatee, and his buzzed hair, his face could be mine. James, my second son, is to the right of the photo, kneeling behind Jim. James is the slimmer, younger version of Jim without a moustache. From the time that he was born, family and friends

commented on his deep set eyes and his impish grin, so much like his dad's. Luke, my third son, is standing behind me. We were about the same height when we posed for the photograph, but soon after, he passed me in height, every son's goal. He is a mixture of Jim and me, like a photo from one of those novelty booths in the mall that blend two faces together into one, a foretaste of how a descendant might look. His skin is lighter than mine, but his hair is thick like mine. Paul is my youngest son. In the photo, he is kneeling next to me; he has grown much taller since this formal photograph was snapped. His dark curly hair is much tighter than my dark waves. His skin is darker than my olive complexion, but in summer, Paul and James have about the same skin tone. Paul's face is rounder than the rest of the faces in the photo. Five of us have pointy chins.

Paul is like us and yet different. He sounds like the rest of the family. His voice sounds much like his brothers' when they were younger. He even uses vocabulary words unexpected for his age, a complication of having three brothers more than six years older than him. Paul is one of us, but from a different clan. He is part of us, yet he did not begin with us. Paul joined our family as an infant, by adoption. And he will always be one of us.

## RENAMING ORIENTAL AVENUE

It is only fair that Parker Brothers reissue *Monopoly* with Oriental Avenue replaced by Asian Avenue.

\*

My oldest son informed me recently that I am no longer to use the word “Oriental.”

“I don’t understand, Kevin. ‘Occidental’ refers to the western hemisphere. ‘Oriental’ is for the eastern hemisphere.”

Kevin admitted to not quite understanding either, but his Asian-American friends object to the word “Oriental,” so I am now to use the word “Asian” in its place as requested. I will be a sensitive twenty-first century mom and remember to be more considerate of the feelings of others.

\*

According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, “oriental” means “of, from, or characteristic of the Far East.” However, the COED warns that “oriental” is “often offensive” and that the term is “old-fashioned and potentially offensive as a term denoting people from the Far East.” In the United States, the dictionary advises the word “Asian” as a better choice.

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*Monopoly* was first marketed in 1935. Oriental Avenue is space number six on the *Monopoly* game board, between Reading Railroad and Chance. The light blue property is grouped with Connecticut and Vermont Avenues. The game property costs one hundred dollars, a bargain for any lot of land today never mind a piece of the resort area of Atlantic City, New Jersey. One house costs fifty dollars. Today a tent would cost more. One hotel is fifty dollars plus four houses. The total, four hundred-fifty dollars, is less than two nights in July at The Showboat, a casino and hotel along the shore of Atlantic City.

\*

Asia is composed of about fifty highly diverse countries. But my initial fascination with things Asian, especially the Japanese culture and language, did not begin when my children started watching Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. I, along with my children, watched the masked and belted Turtles fight and right wrongs in television shows and in the movies. And I admit to knowing the names of all four ninja turtles: Michelangelo (orange mask and belt), Donatello (purple), Leonardo (blue), and Raphael (red), plus Master Splinter (a rat and a *sensei*), April O’Neill (a reporter and Turtle friend), Casey Jones (a vigilante, Turtle ally, and April’s love interest), and Shredder (the villain and leader of the Foot Clan). I bought the action figures and the tee shirts, for the children, not for me, but I had no desire to learn more about the Japanese culture. Even when my sons began reading *manga* and watching *anime*, I was not really drawn into Japanese culture, but just expressed a motherly interest.

However, when a family at my church invited a Japanese exchange student, Junko, to spend one school year at their home, I took notice. As a transplant from Brooklyn, New York, to southern West Virginia, I could understand the difficulty of adapting to a different way of life. I talked to Junko, a high school student, weekly and tried to make her feel welcome. She shyly, but kindly, helped me to begin to understand what it means to grow up Japanese. Over eight years, my family and I invited some of the seven students who followed Junko to our home along with our friends, the host family. The students enjoyed visiting an American family, and I valued their surprise at our way of life, many things of which I took for granted. Like the size of our house--Japanese homes are generally smaller than American homes. Like the size of our family--Japanese families are usually limited to two children. One exchange student shared a small room with her brother, so my four children seemed extravagant. I learned from the students that

Japanese families value presentation of food and use a variety of dish shapes. I scoured discount stores and found a large green palm leaf-shaped platter, a medium crescent-shaped bowl, and a small fish-shaped dish. The plates were a delight to the Japanese students who tired of round dishes, and the students' enjoyment touched me.

I did not know much about the Japanese culture, and, if I were to make my guests comfortable, I needed to learn. I began to read about Japan. I dabbled in glossy travel guides and exquisite children's books, looking at lush photographs of downtown areas in very crowded cities with glowing neon signs in Roman and Japanese lettering. The pastoral countryside looked much like West Virginia but with buildings topped by roofs that curved upward. I listened to Japanese music, both traditional *koto* music and contemporary songs like the Yosida Brothers' "Starting on a Journey." I moved up to more sophisticated books and began to read about 4,000 years of Japanese history. I read translations of short stories that were fatalistic, but I began to understand the emotional consequences of living with the possibility of earthquakes, *tsunami*, or the eruption of Mount Fuji. I read a translation of Basho's *haiku*. *Haiku* is a contraction of "*haikai no ku*," meaning "light verse." *Haiku* is peaceful and contemplative, poetry that hints at a season, but is often sad. Buddhism contributes to the thoughtfulness of *haiku*, while a general awareness of the frailty of life overshadows the poems. Cherry blossoms are often featured, a culturally known symbol of the beauty and brevity of life. While I did not meditate on cherry blossoms, I did write amateur traditional *haiku*.

Bright sun warms my arms.  
Soft sand clings to my browned legs.  
Sea water splashes.

And I wrote contemporary *haiku*.

The bright sun beats on  
my windshield. I see squashed bugs.

Find the blue Windex.

By that time, I needed to develop a small Japanese vocabulary to understand the commentary on Japanese literature and the culture that produced such beautiful work.

\*

The likelihood of landing on Oriental Avenue is twenty-five in twenty-eight attempts. What, I wondered, was the likelihood of me learning Japanese?

\*

My language study began innocently enough. I borrowed a children's language video from the library. I have never thought of myself as someone who could speak a foreign language. Although most of my family is bilingual and my parents speak English and Italian fluently, I understand very little Italian. I studied French for four years, but cannot say much beyond, *J'ai une boîte de crayon rouge*, a standing joke between my husband and me. I never did feel comfortable with the French language either. As an adult, I spent six weeks in an informal Greek class. I learned to use a Greek Lexicon, but that is like hunting and pecking on a keyboard rather than touch typing.

\*

My younger sister, Ginny, and I played *Monopoly* when we were growing up, especially on rainy summer days when we could not swim and were tired of our Barbie dolls. Birth order theory proposes that the eldest child in a family tends to be more traditional and more firmly connected to home. In some ways I am a homebody, more so than my younger sister. However, I was always the child with a fascination for people and cultures unlike me and mine. I was drawn to the light blue properties that included Vermont Avenue, Connecticut Avenue, and Oriental Avenue. While I had visited Vermont and Connecticut, the word "Oriental" sounded mysterious

and far away to me. I often bought the light blue properties. While Ginny lives in New Jersey, a few hours from where we played *Monopoly* on our gray living room carpet, I moved to West Virginia, away from the Atlantic Ocean, in the Appalachian Mountains, to people of Scots-Irish descent with customs much different from my Sicilian family.

\*

I progressed from the children's video to audio language tapes. While driving alone, I would listen to a phrase and repeat it, rewinding the tape many times, until I could mimic the native speaker exactly.

“*Ohayo gozaimasu!*” “Good morning!” Literally, “It is early!”

“*O genki desu ka.*” “How are you?” *O genki* has connotations of politeness. *Desu* is pronounced “des” meaning “are.” The word *ka* is a marker denoting a question. This phrase does not contain a subject; in many Japanese sentences, the subject is not used but is implied.

I moved on to written language. By that time, my friends were hosting their eighth Japanese exchange student, a young man named Kentaro. My second son, James, developed a warm relationship with him. On Kentaro's first visit to our home, he approved of the index cards scattered around our house labeling objects with Japanese words. *Kabe*, meaning “wall.” *Kagami*, “mirror.” *Denki*, “lamp.” *Daidokoro*, “kitchen.” James and I had not learned Japanese characters yet. We were still limited to *romaji*, Roman letters.

\*

Oriental Avenue in Atlantic City was originally named for an Oriental rug shop, whose name is no longer known. Oriental rugs are woven in many countries, from the nations of Turkey and Cyprus in the west to China and Vietnam in the east, including Middle Eastern countries and India. The resort neighborhood was then composed of middle-class Jewish families with the

requisite kosher delicatessens. About ten blocks long, the avenue once ended at the boardwalk and Absecon Lighthouse, the tallest beacon along the New Jersey shoreline. Absecon Lighthouse, a 171-foot structure perched at the shore end of Oriental Avenue, allowed the Coast Guard to scout for enemy submarines during World War II.

I wonder if the Japanese edition of *Monopoly* has an Oriental Avenue?

\*

In Orientalism, Edward Said's foundational book concerning relationships between the East and the West, Said defines orientalism as,

a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on. (88)

According to Said, this Western understanding of the East is faulty. And since I am a product of Western culture, is my interpretation of Eastern culture skewed?

\*

On a trip last summer to visit Ginny, who lives outside of Atlantic City, about three hours from Brooklyn (where we grew up), my mom, my husband, Jim, my son Paul, and I explored Oriental Avenue. The Oriental rug shop is long gone. There is not one kosher delicatessen. Although the boardwalk is partially in place, Absecon Lighthouse was decommissioned, and moved inland several blocks to Vermont Avenue, another light blue property in *Monopoly*. Now,

the pale yellow lighthouse with a black band around its middle serves tourists instead of sailors. For a fee, the lighthouse arranges school field trips, thematic children's parties like "Myths of Mermaids," or overnight educational programs. Daniel Scull, the first Absecon lighthouse keeper, might be dismayed to learn that people are paying to sleep in a lighthouse that he was paid to oversee. For a few dollars, tourists can climb the 228-step black spiral stairway to a platform at the base of the lens, catch an ocean breeze, and see the changing Atlantic City skyline. The neighborhood is far from middle-class now, more working class, but quite run down. A new casino, The Ravel, is under construction and a block away from the casino there is one pizza place on Oriental Avenue.

I visited Tony's Boloney's, the full-service pizzeria near Vermont Avenue that even offers breakfast. The building is non-descript white masonry with beige siding covering the outside of the second story, but I prefer locally owned businesses to chain restaurants, especially when traveling, so we went in and ordered. While my family and I waited patiently for our pepperoni pizza slices, sipping our drinks, listening to the screech of seagulls break the monotonous hum of the refrigerators filled with cold drinks, two African-American men came in asking Tony for work.

"We're not hiring now. But leave your name and phone number because we're always looking. We're waiting for the day when the new casino comes in. So let me know your skills and we'll get in touch," Tony told them. Cheerful goodbyes followed on both sides.

When I was a child, only Italian-Americans worked in pizzerias. Although pizza is not an Italian food, the ingredients are part of traditional Italian cuisine: bread dough baked crisp, fragrant tomato sauce, rich mozzarella. Not surprisingly, many Italian-Americans organized pizza-based businesses and hired family. An African-American man as a chef, or even as a

cashier, would have been unthinkable. Back then, the differences between people and cultures were seen as much greater than the similarities. However, our nation has long been multicultural and multiracial, more so than most other countries. Yet, Americans have lacked tolerance for cultural and racial differences. We have long been told, but not long believed, that we should not judge other people on the basis of the color of skin. Yet, people of all racial groups tend to pre-judge to the detriment of us all.

And it was sometime after the white flight from cities to suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s, people on all sides paused and started listening. By the 1980s, when Japan began exporting quality electronics, I no longer heard harsh comments about World War II and Japanese imports. Maybe I just stopped listening, but I think something more is happening. I think that the firmly fixed divisions that separated people by race and national origin are slowly collapsing.

\*

After I read about Japan and studied the Japanese language for a year and a half, James expressed an interest in learning Japanese and becoming a translator. He had been studying the language on his own. I registered him for a class in Japanese language and culture, and I registered myself, too. We completed a year of Japanese, learning to speak, read, and write some very elementary Japanese with Roman letters, one of the four Japanese writing systems. We learned *hiragana* and *katakana*, two other Japanese writing systems, and a few *kanji*, or ideographs, the fourth writing system. Knowledge of ten thousand *kanji* are needed to complete a bachelor's degree program in Japan. James went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts in Japanese through Marshall University's nascent program, spending his junior year as an exchange student at *Kansai Gaidai* University in Osaka. He brought back a lovely music box for me that plays "*Sakura, Sakura*" literally "Cherry Blossoms, Cherry Blossoms," a haunting, traditional tune that

speaks to the brevity of life. James is teaching English in Japan this year, his fourth and final year in that position.

I, sadly, am still an amateur speaker of the Japanese language, although I do know enough to bow and say, “*Hajimemashite*,” or “It is good to meet you” (literally, “to begin”), when introduced to a Japanese citizen. “*Hajimemashite*” has connotations of embarking on a relationship, a life-long involvement. In Japan, friendships are not as easily begun, nor as carelessly discarded, as sometimes happens in the United States. There is a stability of connection that challenges our unsteady and more casual friendships. While many Japanese people are delighted that I have begun to learn their language, some are shocked, even speechless at the idea that an American can speak Japanese at all. More shocking is the offer of relationship outside the Japanese clan.

\*

Japanese society is not like American society. Although the Japanese have assimilated a great deal of western culture--movies, music, clothing, electronics--the Japanese are not Americans who live on the other side of the world. Much has been written about the American experiment of democracy, a trial repeated in other countries. Even more fascinating is the American experience, the polyglot of languages and the patchwork of cultures in every American city and many suburban areas and the ongoing conversation about how to treat each new group, how to share our country with citizens who are different.

Japan is quite the opposite. While not absolutely homogeneous, Japan has a history of consciously and even fanatically preserving the Japanese language and culture. Until the end of World War II, “Women with auburn or brownish hair were forced to dye it black. Anyone with any non-Japanese-like feature was suspect,” writes Boyé Lafayette De Mente in The Japanese

Have a Word for It (306). Much earlier, in the 1620s through the 1630s, in a fit of xenophobia, the Japanese government crucified thousands of Christians, Japanese and foreign, laymen and priests, *daimyo* and peasant, fearing that the government and Buddhism would be usurped. Many countries have persecuted foreigners and even their own people. However, Japan closed to outsiders for more than two hundred years, except for a few merchants confined to one tiny island. Any Japanese who had contact with outsiders without permission from the government was exiled, and executed if he or she returned to Japan.

Further, De Mente, who spent twenty-five years in Japan, explains that the Japanese term “*eigo zukai*” means “the dangers of speaking English” (87-88). The expression warns against exposing one’s self and the country to foreign influence. The reverse was necessarily to be avoided: teaching foreigners to speak Japanese. To learn a foreign language or to teach Japanese to *gaijin*, a foreigner, was anti-Japanese, even traitorous. Although English language study is required now and begins as early as kindergarten in Japan, and even though foreign language study is essential to Japan remaining a political and economic world power, the term “*eigo zukai*” is still a derogatory term for a Japanese citizen who speaks English. A further complication to international understanding is that only someone with a Japanese parent can become a Japanese citizen. Even those of Korean descent, born and raised in Japan, are not and cannot become, citizens, unless one parent is Japanese. Being Japanese is personal and closed. When an outsider like me speaks in Japanese, the barrier between us has been breached. The mystique of the Japanese culture is somehow unveiled, exposed, in danger.

However, Japan is changing, too. For the first time in Japanese history, grandparents are having difficulty understanding their grandchildren, not because of generational or technological gaps, but because Japanese young people have absorbed so many foreign words, especially

English, just as Americans have integrated Japanese words into English. Some words that have become part of the Japanese language include: *shawa* (shower), *rajio* (radio), *bideo* (video), *beddo* (western-style bed), and *furaipan* (frying pan).

\*

Edward Said postulates in Orientalism:

I have begun with the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely *there*, just as the Occident itself is not just *there* either. We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities--to say nothing of historical entities--such locales, regions, geographical sectors as "Orient" and "Occident" are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other. (89)

Said has a point in that as human beings we have a great deal more in common than we have differences. One similarity is that it is more natural for us to fear and distrust the other and the change that she or he may bring than to trust and welcome. Trust takes effort, a conscious letting go of what is.

\*

There are three versions of *Monopoly* produced in Japan. The "American" set is partly bilingual. This set contains Oriental Avenue, for the Occidentals, I suppose. The box's lettering is in English and in Japanese. Interestingly, the Japanese word for *Monopoly* is written in

*katakana*, a writing system that distinguishes Japanese-based words from all words of foreign origin. Even the Japanese language distinguishes between native and foreign born. There are two “Japan” sets of *Monopoly*, a *Japan-Cities* and a *Japan-Tokyo* version. In the *Japan-Cities* set, each property is named after a city in Japan. The *Japan-Tokyo* set, the third *Monopoly* game manufactured in Japan, is placed in Tokyo rather than in Atlantic City. *Monopoly* sets made overseas are often reconfigured for the country’s capital city or another major city. In the *Japan-Tokyo* set, Oriental Avenue is renamed “*Kinshicho*,” a lovely name meaning “Silk Thread Town.”

\*

A few weeks before James was about to leave the States to teach English to elementary school students in Japan, I told him my idea.

“James,” I began, “I am planning to turn your room into a guest room.” His face fell, despite the obvious that his room would be empty of him for at least one year. But no one likes that “Here’s-your-hat-what’s-your-hurry” feeling, the uncomfortable sensation of being escorted out the door before one is quite ready to leave. Regrouping, I added, “What do you think about an Oriental-themed room?” He smiled broadly and agreed. Thus, we return to the place where I began my essay, my conversation with my eldest son, Kevin, concerning the use of the word “Oriental” versus the word “Asian.”

\*

I asked Cindy, a friend who is Japanese-American, about the Asian/Oriental controversy. Would she shed light on the issue? “That’s an interesting topic,” she emailed me.

I spoke to some of my friends and “Oriental” is overall an offensive term. It’s not necessarily a racial slur, but it mostly has to do with being outdated and [a]

Western-centric term. I believe the term was widely used by Westerners during a time when Asians were mostly thought of as being exotic and backwards. . . . In the US, the term “Asian” is even further divided into East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian cultures (that’s how it was at UCLA).

I did not know that I might be viewed as offensive. I thought I was just being descriptive.

\*

To amuse me, my mom told me about her changing neighborhood in Brooklyn, the borough of New York City in which I grew up.

“You know where the Simons used to live on Avenue U? Over the laundromat? Guess what’s there now?” Mom asked.

“I don’t know. What?” I replied, wondering where this train of thought was leading.

“A Japanese hair salon!” Mom is very proud that James speaks Japanese and notes any news related to Japan or the Japanese people. “There are different colored neon lights and Orientals inside.”

“You can’t say ‘Oriental,’ Mom. You have to say ‘Asian,’” I explained.

“Koreans and Japanese *are* Orientals . . . .” she pressed.

“I know. I don’t really understand either. ‘Oriental’ is offensive to some people. You have to say, ‘Asian’ or you could hurt feelings,” I continued.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“I know, Mom. I have to remember, too.”

“Well, I’ll remember the continent of Asia,” she closed.

\*

I have long been sympathetic to the concept of choosing what one is named. I have not forgotten my junior high social studies teacher, Mrs. Saltzman, who intentionally mispronounced my Italian-American family name. I corrected her, but she persisted. I could believe she made an error, except that she mispronounced my cousin's different last name, also Italian-American. In a twisted game of intimidation, my teacher lauded it over her young students. No authority figure had ever played so roughly with me when it was so unnecessary. I had some compassion for her later in the school year when I learned that her husband was very ill. Despite months of bravado, she cried at her desk one day in front of my class when she told us about Mr. Saltzman's poor health. I forgave all.

I do not know much about all fifty or so Asian nations, but I believe to some Asian ears, Westerners referring to people as "Orientals" has that same unkind and unnecessary pressure as I felt from Mrs. Saltzman. So, I must refer to the guest room as "Asian" now, not as "Oriental" and hope that all is forgiven.

\*

The guest room looks great either way. The walls are pale green, reminiscent of spring leaves. The quilt is a deep brown and displays a bamboo branch. The coordinating sheets and curtains are sand-colored and scattered with brown bamboo leaves. A navy blue tablecloth with a light blue and pale green design hangs in a chrome frame over the bed. James' supervisor kindly sent the tablecloth to me from Japan for Christmas. A clock that hangs over the guest room closet has a pastoral drawing on its face. What captured my attention was the Japanese *kanji* counting off the hours and minutes. I checked the numerals: *ichi, ni, san, shi, go, roku, shichi, hachi, kyuu, juu, juu ichi, juu ni*. I found a Japanese clock in West Virginia! And in a corner hangs a framed red blouse, silk, a reminder of the Japanese *Monopoly's* "*Kinshicho*," "Silk Thread Town."

\*

It is only fair that Parker Brothers revise *Monopoly*.

## FOUR FACES OF JOY

### JOY IN NATURE

A few inches of snow fell during the night and iced the streets. Today, the hills of West Virginia are too slippery for school buses to maneuver our country roads, so there will be no school for my children or me. I am not happy that mere weather, a collision of clouds, interferes with my plans for the day. School closings for the state stream across the television screen, screaming the news: school is closed, closed, closed. I will not go to work, and I cannot go to the grocery store until the Johnny-come-lately salt truck clears our road. That will not be until at least 10 AM. Salt has not been so valuable since the Romans conquered the ancient world and remitted salt for wages. No matter when the salt truck meanders up my lane, it is much too cold to let my children play outside. I am not a helicopter mother, hovering over my children, but it is in the teens and the wind is biting. They will be running through the house like baby elephants, or so I tell them as they thump down the stairs and through the living room, furniture and glass chattering as if in fear, photographs on the walls askew, when the menagerie lumbers past. My children shout the news, "School is closed!" Hurray, I think.

My husband, Jim, is home. Telecommuting is an option for him, even though it is not possible for me as a teacher. The children will have to stay quiet, while Jim participates in conference calls. And I know how that will be accomplished. Bribery. Mommy instructs and trains. Daddy bribes. I feel the walls closing in.

I bundle up to shovel the driveway. The thick, fluffy flakes of last evening gave way to light, hard flakes doing an aerial ballet this morning. But maybe the snow will magically disappear from our city if I do something, anything, to move the white stuff along. I just know

that I cannot stay inside any more. Sweater, jacket, scarf, hat, boots, gloves. Still, I shiver when I open the door. I hope that the exertion will warm me.

The massive oak trees surrounding my house have a covering of snow—black branches coated with a line as white and straight as perfect teeth grinning at me. I love those trees.

When I was growing up in Brooklyn, New York, I did not have a tree in my backyard, just an old woody bush two stories tall that I would climb to see beyond my backyard. In good weather, I would take a book up into the sturdy bush and read for hours, my sanctuary from the 24/7 activity of city life. Our church's bell would chime three times a day, but I remember the noon chimes the best because I was often in my bush. Later, in college, I bought a book, a slim volume, called A Reverence for Wood. Through it, author Eric Sloane taught me an appreciation for trees themselves, their shapes and their bark colors and textures, and for the beauty that comes from them, their grains, strengths, and uses. I hoped back then that someday I would have my own trees. Now I do.

While I shovel, the wind blows from time to time, and unceremoniously dumps a pile of snow from the high branches to the ground beneath. The hillside is dappled—gray, brown, white; gray rock pressed into brown clay with patches of dark green grass peeking through a layer of clean, feathery snow. I was raised near the ocean in the Sheepshead Bay section of Brooklyn, not far from Flatbush. The operative word is “flat.” I do not remember even seeing a hill until I was about twelve. Mom and Dad took our family on vacation to a camp in the Adirondack Mountains near Tannersville, New York. Now I live on a hill, I drive on hilly roads, and I see more hills in the distance.

I catch my breath as I survey my surroundings. Despite my original discontent with the weather, I relax and enjoy living on the edge of the woods, far from a major city. My oak trees

are the beginning of a wooded area that extends about twenty-five miles west. My family has been treated to sightings of browsing deer, pink-nosed rabbits, and scampering chipmunks. In Brooklyn, I saw an occasional scolding squirrel. And the birds that we see in West Virginia!

A robin pair nests every year in my neighbor's oak tree and serenades us each warm morning with their sweet song. I have observed cardinals, blue jays, woodpeckers, and bluebirds, in addition to the sparrows that I learned to identify when I was growing up. I often hear turkeys during the day and owls at night. Apparently, my home is on a migration route for grackles. Each fall, flocks of about seventy-five grackles land in my backyard, rest, complain a great deal, and move on for the next flock to alight on my lawn. This annual pattern lasts for a whole day.

A pond that we often pass hosts egrets and ospreys. I identified them in my worn copy of The Audubon Society Field Guide of North American Birds. Once when the children and I were driving up our hill on the way home from school, I heard a neighbor scream, a blood-curdling sound of terror. A large bird with a three-foot wingspan rose above her house and the trees. I had never seen such a large bird before. As soon as I was in my home, I ran to my field guide. I had seen a turkey vulture.

My eyes drift down to the patch of snow at my feet. Odd hieroglyphics are sprinkled across the once blank slate. Bird prints. A picture of a dozen chirping robins snatching dried, summer berries from my neighbor's bushes flits through my brain. But the robins are long gone. There are other prints, too. Perhaps a chipmunk? A lively fellow investigated our wood pile the other day, his squeaky voice scolding, his tail slicing through the air like a maestro's baton. I had giggled when I had watched him from inside my home, as I sipped my morning cup of green tea. This morning, the chipmunk might have scurried to this side of the house for a better view of the birds.

The sky lightens and clears and so does my mood. Outside, despite the frigid air and crisp wind, it is difficult to feel melancholy after savoring this view. The sun glitters on the blanket of snow, cheerful although not at all that warm. Reveling in the beauty of nature bubbles up in pleasure, relishing the sights, sounds, and feel of creation's delights.

I have finished shoveling the porch and driveway. Despite the cold, I am reluctant to go back inside. There is healing and joy in nature.

### **JOY IN ANOTHER'S TRIUMPH**

I do not even know the man's name. His son is on the same team as my son, Paul.

"That was beautiful! The way Paul played. Just beautiful!" The man has tears in his eyes and a rapt expression. Paul played an exceptional soccer game. It was his first game of the season as a four-years-old.

I was not surprised that Paul had an advantage over his soccer teammates. From the time Paul was four months old, I shuttled his older brother, James, to and from soccer practices and games, infant in tow. When Paul learned to walk, he began to kick around a much smaller version of James' soccer ball. I have a favorite photograph in which Paul, about two years old at the time, is looking up at me, size-one soccer ball at his feet, as if to ask, "Can we play now?" On his first team, at three years of age, Paul aimed for the goal—and usually scored. Now, at four, he stole the ball, dribbled in an erratic pattern to avoid other baffled players, and homed in on the goal while other children collected dandelions and spun in lazy circles with arms outstretched and faces upturned toward the sun. His teammates were merely doing what four-year-olds are expected to do.

Now, another player's dad stands praising Paul's moves. I am happy; I am mortified. Paul plays well, but what do I say to the other parent?

"Sam did well, too," I offer. This is my lame attempt to return a compliment.

"Ha! I don't think he knows there's a game on!" I cringe. It's true. Sadly, Sam is a dandelion-picker. But he is only four. I am uncomfortable with the comparisons. I am uncomfortable because the other children may be hurt by their parents' praise and the inevitable, "Why can't you play like Paul?"

Can we just play? I wonder.

Each year Paul has become a more proficient soccer player. He has learned much from watching older players. He has added headers, fake-out footwork, goals shot from midfield with a powerful kick. By the time he is ten years old, Paul scores while playing goalie. I can hardly believe my eyes—almost a fifty yard kick.

"Outstanding!" announces a soccer grandmom, as she dons a soccer ball costume to celebrate the goal, her custom since her grandson began playing soccer at five years old.

"Outstanding!"

I cringe. Her grandson chose a trip to the circus over playing soccer one Saturday. I can see his point.

But, I have found joy in my discomfort. I cheer on Paul's teammates.

"Good teamwork!" I yell. "Nice kick! Go Red Lightning!"

The turning point for our team comes at a terrible game when the children were about ten years old. Three referees preside rather than the usual two, a bad sign. We are winning, but the parents of the other team curse and denigrate our team. Their behavior is inappropriate in the least, but actually quite cruel. I am fuming. This is youth soccer, not the World Cup!

The parents of Paul's team are angry and want to retaliate in kind. After all, we just want our kids to have fun. I scheme with a few of our team's parents. We get even—by cheering on our team *and* the opposition. The parents of the other team are confused and persist. Our team's parents continue to make our point. We will not criticize their children. We will not play by their rules. We could have chosen to retaliate, but the children would have suffered—ours and the children on the other team—and so would we, the parents.

There is joy in celebrating the successes of others when you allow yourself the pleasure.

### **JOY IN WORK**

It has been a rough day. One hundred and seventy-three hormone-crazed seventh graders would rather bait, tease, talk, and goof off than do the work that their teacher left for them. Middle school is the bane of many teachers, but I am a *substitute* teacher, so students are sometimes less inclined to work when I am in their classroom. My husband once apologized to me for his behavior in seventh grade toward substitute teachers. If only we all grew up faster.

At home, I shake my head and lace up my sneakers. I need a walk. I rush out of my house into the cool, but sunny afternoon, beating a tattoo on the blacktop. At first, I just let my thoughts wander. Could I have been more effective? Do I need to be more forceful? What should I make for dinner? Questions, answers, and fragments of thoughts swirl through my head like dust devils on an arid day. I needed to explain sooner that their teacher assigned the work; therefore, I am merely conveying her message. Seventh graders should grasp the concept of a substitute, but do not. In one middle school, a classroom teacher encouraged me to send to the office any student who was a problem. "That will make a big impression," she wrote, "and you will not have any more trouble. We do not allow our students to torture substitute teachers!" I should

have thrown out Hailey for talking—ejecting Kimberly and Myna was not enough. I know this group from last year and one feeds on the energy of the other. My thoughts break off and I think about dinner again. Chicken. I will make Lemon Pepper Chicken for dinner. With rice and veggies, we're good.

My mind begins to focus more. As my thoughts slow down so does my stride. Realistically, I can only change the situation so much in one day. The faculty and administration of this middle school are supportive, so I return periodically. I know that disciplining students will result in behavioral changes. By sending rowdy students to the school office, assigning lunch detentions, and leaving a long, detailed note to a classroom teacher who trusts me, eventually students will grasp the point that I really am a teacher, not someone who wandered into the room.

I work to bring my thoughts under better control. I know that there is a better way to handle challenges. I pray for the students who valiantly tried to do their work: may they persevere. And I pray for the students who will spend their next lunch hour in detention: may they change their ways. I pray for the teachers who feel guilty for their students' lack of self-control: may they place responsibility squarely on the students. I pray for the principal who is trying to turn around a struggling, city school: may he win.

And then, there are the lovely times. I am the receiver of hugs from elementary school students even when I return to their classroom later in the year. I enjoy the sweetness of middle school students who welcome me. Lexi left a note on my desk: "Look under the desk!" On the floor under the desk lay a pink sheet of paper. In purple crayon, she had written, "From Mrs. B's Homebase for Mrs. Williams." On the flip side, each student had signed his or her name in a variety of crayon colors, including "Drew O. (the crayon-thrower)." And I will always

remember my two weeks as a high school history teacher. When I turned to write on the board, the girls stood up next to their desks and began singing a cheerful song in Spanish and dancing, their skirts twirling. The boys looked on in amazement.

“Okay . . . that was different,” was all I managed to say as the girls sat down and quietly returned to work.

But, the best times are when a student has a flash of recognition—about the material covered, about how to better learn—but more importantly about themselves, about how to live, to conduct themselves, and to treat others, about how to think and choose the best in life rather than the lesser and poorer choices.

There is a joy in doing difficult, but meaningful, work. There is joy in making a difference in others’ lives. There is joy in watching the slow, steady steps of change for another’s good.

### **JOY IN SORROW**

One Saturday afternoon, the jangling of the telephone disturbs the peace of our home. Jim, my husband, lifts the phone from its cradle and talks quietly for a while, sounding distressed. He hangs up, sighs, and reluctantly moves towards me. He plops down next to me on our navy blue sofa. I know it is bad news before he says a word. A dear friend has cancer. She could not tell me herself, so her husband told my husband who tells me, like a horrible version of the old children’s game, telephone. I cry. Jim wants to visit and would like me to go too.

“I can’t,” I plead.

I have a mental list of the things that I did not want to do: lose my grandparents, lose an aunt, lose a close friend from high school, lose my dad, lose my mother-in-law, lose my father-in-law eighteen months later. The key word is “lose.” And I am not a good loser, never have

been, and this scenario is too close to losing someone that I love. After talking to Jim and praying with him, I am composed, a little numb, but calmer. We leave for the thirty-minute drive.

When Jim and I arrive, Ron, Patti's husband, answers the door, but when Patti realizes that it is us, she rushes past Ron and hugs me before we finish greeting him. Patti and I hold each other for a long time, sobbing and gasping for breath. If only we could hold the ones we love so tightly that we could keep them from harm and keep them from the inevitable. Much time passes, or so it seems. The men are quiet, and until we sit down, I do not realize that our pastor is in the room.

Patti and I alternately talk and cry. Patti explains her symptoms, treatment options, and prognosis. I probe, searching for good news—for hope. I ask questions that have not been asked and cannot be answered. Ron and Patti did not think to ask many things because the diagnosis was a terrible shock. Unhappily, this is Patti's second occurrence of cancer. Ron interjects information and concerns. Patti and I pass a tissue box back and forth, touching the other's arm, each making sure the other is still there. Her mother died from cancer about two years ago. The memory brings fresh tears for both of us.

After a long while, after trying to comfort each other, we shift to related concerns. How will this affect her children? Her father?

"Does Donna know?" I ask. We both know that Donna will be hit hard by the news. A cancer survivor, she loves Patti and knows more intimately what Patti is facing. Patti's recurrence will inevitably stir up in Donna painful memories.

"No. Please tell her. I can't!" More tears. Donna, Patti, and I have known each other for more than ten years. We live far from our extended families and have become family. The three

of us have shared thoughts, prayers, and birthday lunches, holidays, church picnics, family dinners. We have shared a great deal, but we are greedy. It is not enough, not enough time, not enough fun, not enough of each other. We want more. Patti and I talk about the past and the present, but avoid the future. We remember when Ron's mother moved in with the family. I helped Patti paint an unused room for her daughter, Anna. A few days later, Donna and Patti painted Anna's previous room for Ron's mother.

When Jim and I met Ron and Patti, Anna was two or so and still in a high chair. Now, she is a young woman. When Jim and I met Ron and Patti, they had just moved from the Washington, D.C. area. Jim and I were looking for another church after my allergy issues prevented me from entering our own church's building.

A long time would pass before the oddity of our relationship struck me. Ron and Patti had deep ancestral roots in America. Both friends descended from American Civil War soldiers and Patti had kin in the American Revolution. Jim and I were two kids from Brooklyn. We knew our ancestors, the immigrants from the old country; we had heard our ancestor's home languages and knew their foreign cultures.

Yet the differences between our two families paled next to our similarities. Ron and Patti had five children; Jim and I had four. Both Patti and I were devoted stay-at-home mothers, only working after our children were ready for that change. Ron and Patti were enthusiastic home-schoolers; Jim and I had occasionally home-schooled some of our brood when circumstances required. Patti and I were avid readers and often exchanged books that one of us thought the other would enjoy. We were only a few years apart in age, close enough to have a sister-like relationship.

However, these similarities were superficial. The glue that bound the four of us together was our faith. We held the conviction that how we live on earth makes a difference and how we prepare ourselves for the day we die, whether soon or in many years, is all that we can carry with us.

On that awful Saturday, Patti and I talk about our faith, reminding each other of scripture that we have memorized, those promises kept, and of the difficulties through which we have already persevered. By this time, we had each lost a parent and we both knew that we would not have more children, our pasts and our futures disrupted. We remind each other of our friendship and the love and concern of the rest of our church.

“How do you want us to tell the congregation? They will want to know,” I ask. They will want to encourage Patti and Ron and to provide practical help. Patti asks that Jim explain her situation to the congregation on Sunday morning. I will take Donna aside and talk to her beforehand. She will need privacy and time to absorb the news.

Our pastor, Ron and Patti, Jim and I pray together and say our goodbyes. It has been three grievous hours. Yet, even in this great sorrow, there is joy: joy for our friendship and joy in our hope.

But sorrow is a heavy burden, not easily carried. I am at heart a pessimist who aspires to optimism. My analysis may seem absurd, but consider the advantage. I expect the worst, but I look for, hope for, the best. When a storm threatens, I check my supply of batteries, buy needed groceries, and charge my cell phone. I pray that my electricity will stay on, that power lines that run through miles of tree-covered hills will bear up under the wind, snow, fallen branches, or occasional ice. However, a power outage is only an annoyance compared to the troubles in life. I prepare for the weightier problems in life more thoroughly.

Before I had major surgery about ten years ago, I had planned simple meals for Jim to cook for our family of six. I tidied the house and explained to the children what to expect and how they would need to help. When I described my preparations to Patti, she confronted me with a single question: “Have you mentally prepared yourself for surgery?” Good question. I had been so wrapped up in caring for myself physically and my family physically and mentally, that I had forgotten about my own emotional needs. The need to arrange my thoughts and feelings for what I was about to face, to steady myself as if for a battle. In that case, my preparations had been incomplete.

After Patti was diagnosed with a fourth and final occurrence of cancer, I mentioned to her a C. S. Lewis quote that I had run across. I do not remember how the excerpt came up in our conversation, but it struck her, as it touched me as very true, very practical, very encouraging. Patti asked me to send her a link to screen wallpaper with the quote, and of course I sent it to her. In God in the Dock, Lewis wrote, “If you think of this world as a place intended simply for our happiness, you find it quite intolerable: think of it as a place of training and correction and it’s not so bad” (52). The quote was part of my mental preparation for losing my friend. Even now, more than a year later, it is my wallpaper.

When Patti was handed her fourth diagnosis of cancer, she was advised to commit to chemotherapy rather than just surgery. I had supported other family and friends through their chemotherapy treatments, so I understood the problems and hoped for benefits. Somehow, though both Patti and Donna tried to tell me that she was losing her battle, I persisted in attributing Patti’s loss of energy to chemotherapy. I should have seen, but I did not. Was it the Lord God or my mind that continued to prepare me, gently reminding me of another friend, Judy, who fought cancer for ten years, before she succumbed? I remember pushing the comparison

away, pushing the thoughts away, but there it was. Finally, a friend told me frankly that Patti was dying. After I sobbed uncontrollably, I thanked her for her kindness and assured her that she had done the right thing.

That night, the last time that I saw Patti, she was too weak to sit up in bed. Patti and Ron, Jim and I chatted for a long time, the telephone game put aside, facts faced. After talking for a while, she tired, and I moved to go. Ever the southern lady, she did not want me to feel rushed out. “I will be right in the next room,” I told her as I left her bedroom to join her family and mine in the living room. “If you feel like talking, I will come back.” But she did not rally, and less than two weeks later, she was gone.

Grief is pain, a searing of a heart. None of us wants the pain of grief. It is red, swollen eyes, sobbing and choking on our own tears, tears dripping out the nose. However, the alternative is a cold, hard spirit that does not dare to love or cannot love, a heart with an impassable firewall refusing to be infected by the viruses of love and affection. In The Four Loves, C. S Lewis wrote of the human heart. “Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable” (121).

To love is to risk grief and sorrow.

However, I had great joy in knowing Patti. And I do not regret the pain I suffered for the joy of loving a kind, and spirited friend. And I have joy in trusting that I will see Patti again, that when I told her that I would be in the next room, I spoke a great deal of truth.

And there will come a day when I will have joy in seeing her again.

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