



# Byline

PERSEVERANCE

DECEMBER 2022

# Contents

---

3

“One step, then another”

by Arlene Smith, President, CAA-NCR

4

How long should your manuscript be?

5

Haiku and a poem

Poetry by Diana Taylor

Donna McDougall

and Betty Warrington-Kearsley

6

Upcoming Events

7

“The Mysterious Comma”

By Sherrill Wark

9

News!

11

“The Flycatcher”

A short story by Sara Jane O’Neill

16

“Entering Writing Contests”

by Catina Noble

17

“The Hope Chest”

A short story by Christine Beelen

# One step, then another

BY ARLENE SMITH

**“How is it possible for an entire country to be uphill?”**

I asked the question during our trip to Scotland to visit our son. At every turn, we encountered another climb. It started with Arthur’s Seat in Edinburgh, then the Three Sisters in the Highlands, and the Old Man of Storr on the Isle of Skye. I took the picture beside this column on the Isle of Iona.

“They could post that sign anywhere in Scotland and it would be true,” I said.

We made all those climbs by placing one foot in front of another. Steep slopes and poor footing challenged us. We huffed for breath, and more than once we asked if we should stop. There would have been no shame in that. We took breaks to rest, and that was when we realized that the views surrounding us were spectacular. We ate wild blackberries growing by the path.

**Sometimes our writing path feels like the same uphill grind.**

We could post that sign anywhere along the writing process and it would be true. It starts with finishing a first draft, then reviewing and editing, then cutting down the word count. Learning curves and technology fails challenge us. We struggle with queries and pitches, and more than once we ask if we should stop. There would be no shame in that. We take breaks, and with any luck we take time to appreciate the view. We enjoy the fruits of our work too.

In this edition, we will enjoy two short stories that touch on perseverance in different ways. In one, an adult child must move

*continued on page 4*

BYLINE 3



*continued from page 3*

on after the death of a parent, and in the other, the natural world carries on through change. We'll read an article about entering contests, and how that might bear fruit for you to enjoy on your climb. And we'll enjoy the haiku poems written in response to our "Haiku and a Poem" challenge. We'll even discover how the dear old comma needs to persevere.

Enjoy the work of our talented creators, and wherever you are on the climb, keep stepping up, and have a look around at all the beautiful stories and people in your view.



# HOW LONG SHOULD YOUR MANUSCRIPT BE?

## Adult Novel

**80,000 to 90,000 words:** Ideal range

**Fewer than 70,000:** Too short (except cozy mystery)

**70,000 to 80,000:** Too short, but might be okay

**90,000 to 100,000:** A little long, but might be fine

**100,000 to 110,000:** Too long, but could be okay

**More than 110,000:** Too long (except fantasy)

## Picture Books

50 to 1,000 words

## Early Readers

200 to 3,500 words

## Children's Chapter Books

4,000 to 10,000 words

## Middle Grade

20,000 to 55,000 words

## Upper Middle Grade

40,000 to 55,000 words

## Young Adult

55,000 to 90,000 words

# Haiku



Whisper your wishes  
Once wild wayside wind-walkers  
Presage autumn's snow.

By Diana Taylor

and a

standing milkweed pod  
from its rear birthing  
seeds in silk 'chutes

By Betty Warrington-Kearsley

milkweed pod envelopes  
brown seeds breezed transformation  
yellow butterflies.

By Donna McDougall

# photo

## UPCOMING EVENTS

# GETTING YOUR WRITING INTO THE HANDS OF READERS

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 25, 2023  
7:00 P.M. TO 8:00 P.M.  
VIA ZOOM

As writers we want the same thing: to get our stories or poems into the hands (or e-readers, or phones, or tablets) of readers. How can we do that? These days there are more options and opportunities than ever.

Scott Overton will share his experience with getting his novels, short stories and audiobooks out there.

# A CONVERSATION WITH ROY MCGREGOR

AN IN-PERSON EVENT.  
DATE TO BE DETERMINED

# FIND A POEM

TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2023  
7:00 P.M. TO 8:00 P.M.  
VIA ZOOM

Found poems take snippets from existing texts and use them in a different way to create poetry. Creators can choose from newspaper articles, essays, speeches, letters, other poems, or even street art. JC Sulzenko will lead us in an interactive workshop so we all can find a poem in the words around us.



# THE MYSTERIOUS COMMA

BY SHERRILL WARK

“In the 3rd century BC, Aristophanes of Byzantium invented a system of single dots (*distinctiones*) that separated verses (*colometry*), and indicated the amount of breath needed to complete each fragment of text, when reading aloud. The different lengths were signified by a dot at the bottom, middle, or top of the line. For a short passage (a *komma*), a *media distinctio* dot was placed mid-level ( · ). This is the origin of the concept of a comma, although the name came to be used for the mark itself instead of the clause it separated. The mark used today is descended from a diagonal slash, or *virgula suspensiva* ( / ), used from the 13th to 17th centuries to represent a pause. The modern comma was first used by Aldus Manutius.”

—Wikipedia

---

No doubt, these *distinctiones* were first used by speech writers to aid rulers wishing to make a good impression on their rulees.

| “*Veni, vidi, vici.*” — *Julius Caesar*

Commas are no longer used as indications of when or when not to take a breath when reading; they are used to set off elements of a sentence. Well, that depends. With communication, everything depends, doesn't it?

An excerpt from *Transplanted Heads: Your Muse Can't Write Worth Sh\*t*, a sequel to *How to Write a Book: Park it, Get to Work*, Sherrill Wark, Crowe Creations, 2020.

First publication ©2015 WordPress as sherrillwark.com.

If we are, indeed, writing a speech (or doing a reading from one of our works), then we may put in all the commas—the take-a-breath-here indicators—our little hearts desire. But for written works, commas should be where grammatically required, not where dramatically required.

I could rhyme off a litany of grammar terms, or I could provide some examples.

## PHRASES/ADVERBS/EXPRESSIONS/CLAUSES

Commas are little hooks that can lift a phrase/adverb/expression/clause out of a sentence and move it somewhere else; or they can insert a phrase into a sentence. We need one on each end of these phrases/adverbs/expressions/clauses. Whatever is between two commas can be removed without damaging the sentence. Picture the cables on a window-cleaner's platform. Take one away ... *Kaboom!* Consider the sentence:

**My brother, Bill, ate his soup.**

I can remove both commas and the name Bill and end up with a complete sentence.

**My brother, ~~Bill,~~ ate his soup.**

**My brother ate his soup.**

*continued on page 8*

*continued from page 7*

- Commas around a name mean it is essential to the sentence. It implies that the writer is talking about one specific person. Taken out of context it can imply that there is only one person of that kind.
- No commas mean the name is essential to the sentence. It implies that the person is one of many.

I could have written “My brother Bill ate his soup,” but I have only one brother. Leaving the commas out in this case could imply that, perhaps, my brother Tom did not eat any soup.

Spot the difference between “my brother, Bill,” and “my brother Bill? The lowly little comma wields great power.

## THE IMPLIED COMMA

**If a phrase/adverb/expression/clause starts a sentence, the other comma is implied as in:**

, Arriving home from work, Bill was hungry.

, Nevertheless, he didn't want to cook anything.

, Dammit, I thought there would be something to eat.

Whatever is between two commas can be removed without damaging the sentence. In my editing travels, I often see the comma appear only after the inserted name.

**My brother Bill, ate his soup.**

In that phrase, there is an implied comma. Let's remove the [erroneous] comma'd section.

~~, My brother Bill,~~ ate his soup.

**ate his soup** is not a complete sentence.

Let's remove the implied comma'd section from this one:

**My wife Jeanne, my brother Bill, and the whole family went camping.**

Oh, wait a minute. Looks like this guy has more than one wife and more than one brother ... Hey! Come on. That's what it says right now. Fix by adding commas:

**My wife, Jeanne, my brother, Bill, and the whole family went camping.**

No matter how cluttered it appears, the commas are needed to communicate the truth. If we are uncomfortable with all those commas in there, we can reword the sentence to avoid it.

**I asked my wife and my brother if they wanted to go camping. They said yes, so Jeanne, Bill and the whole family came to Bon Echo Park with me.**

Rather than regurgitate all uses of the comma, I'll supply a link: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comma](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comma) You may trust what is written there.



*Sherrill Wark is a former typesetter who has been protecting the lives of commas for over fifty years.*





### **Three**

An anthology featuring the short story *Arbour Marie* by Sheila Burpee Duncan

Sheila Burpee Duncan was one of the finalists for the 2022 [Penguin Random House Student Award for Fiction](#).

This award is for fiction, either in the form of a short story or a novel excerpt, open to all creative writing students who took a course at the University of Toronto in the previous year.

The winner received a prize of \$2,500, and the two finalists received prizes of \$1,000 each.

## NEWS!



### ***Horses in the Sand***

By Lorrie Potvin

[Find out more](#)

The year 2022 has been good for Lorrie Potvin, author, teacher, and auto body apprentice. She received the 2022 Algonquin College Alumni of Distinction Award for Apprenticeship, and she published *Horses in the Sand*, a sequel to *First Gear: A Motorcycle Memoir*.

*Horses in the Sand* is a collection of stories that document a queer Métis woman's journey from sparse beginnings as a child to becoming a tradeswoman, teacher, and artist. With courage, humour, and frank honesty, the stories describe what it was like to grow up as a girl who was starkly different from "normal" and how "coming out" became a lifelong process of self-acceptance and changing identities. Ultimately, this memoir is a celebration of making art, telling stories, and of finding her birth father, a family of half siblings, and an Indigenous community whose presence she had always felt, but to which she never knew she belonged.

BUY

## NEWS!



### ***Feeling Good II: More life lessons from my friends***

**By Louise Rachlis**

[Find out more](#)

More than 10 years ago, Louise Rachlis didn't want a party for her 65th birthday, and so she wrote a book, *Feeling Good: Life lessons from my friends*.

Now, following her 75th birthday, she has done it again with *Feeling Good II*. The book is a compilation of stories from contributors who share how they managed through the COVID years, what got them through and cheered them up. Positive outlooks Rachlis feels we still need today.

All proceeds are being donated to the Acoustic Neuroma Association of Canada.

**BUY**



### ***The Marta Poems***

**By Susan J. Atkinson**

[Find out more](#)

The Marta Poems is a collection which showcases the strength of the human spirit through the story of Marta, whose life weaves from Poland to Siberia, from Rhodesia to England, and then finally to Canada. Her path is a familiar one for many who were displaced during WWII and highlights the struggles of the ordinary surviving the extraordinary. Marta's plight will be familiar with many, and as she endeavours to find a home, she becomes an unlikely spokesperson for so many unheard voices.

**BUY**



# The Flycatcher

A SHORT STORY

BY SARA JANE O'NEILL



**Garrick had no time for modern ways, but that didn't stop them from tromping into his neighbourhood.**

"Elly, did you hear the news? Adair told me this morning. Another one of those damn subdivisions is coming in. They are getting closer every year!"

"Oh, I heard, Garrick, I heard. It's a shame to lose such a lovely meadow. Hopefully, Adair will adapt well to his new neighbours."

Adapt? How could anyone adapt to such nonsense?

"Didn't we say that about Ash and Lindsay? And look what happened to them! Within a month of that Bear Creek development going in, they were gone. Couldn't handle how everything had changed with all the pavement and the garages. My god, the garages! Who needs that much stuff, Elly? You know damn well those developments always destroy the thing they are named after, right?"

Garrick gazed out at the untouched forest surrounding his home. He would never grow tired of watching the sunlight trickle through the canopy to create a moving mosaic of light on the forest floor. How anyone could destroy something so wondrous was beyond him.

"Oh Garrick, sweetie. I know what you are thinking but

don't you go getting into one of your endless rants. You're too old for that."

"It's not a rant if it's the truth, Elly!"

And Garrick knew it was. He'd heard the horror stories. All around them, great tracts of forest were being dug up and demolished, replaced with a sea of pavement and concrete. How long until they came here?

When Garrick had first come to this community, decades ago now, the forest had been brimming with life. It was the perfect spot to set down roots and raise a family. But as the years passed and the monotonous pastel walls closed in, things started changing. At first, it was small things, like the creek running a little higher and faster in the spring. But then the wolves started to stay away, and then the bears. Nothing has been the same since.

"Hey, Garrick! Did you hear the news?"

Garrick stirred from his brooding to find his good friend Decker heading down the path toward him. Garrick reached out with a warm welcome.

"Decker! Where have you been, pal? I haven't seen you in ages!"

*continued on page 12*

*continued from page 11*

Decker plopped down in the seat Garrick provided and shook his head. “I hate to say it Garrick, but I’ve been out hunting for a new home.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“Ah Garrick, you and I both know this place is not the same. It no longer feels...right. Yesterday, first thing in the morning I went to check out one of the new neighbourhoods, you know, to see what we would be dealing with. Well, they may look all nice and shiny on the outside but once you get in there, there’s nothing! No food, no streams, no trees. Nothing.”

Decker’s gaze drifted around Garrick’s home, the place where they had met so many years ago. “No, this place is changing and not for the better, my friend. Marge and I are homing in on a new spot a little farther up the hillside. You know that dirt road, past the big yellow gate?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of it.”

“Well, it’s just beyond that. Gorgeous spot. The locals tell us that the big subdivision developers can’t go up there. The terrain won’t work for them or something like that. So it’s safe, for now anyway. That’s all I can ask for, you know?”

Garrick wanted to be happy for his dear friend but Decker leaving was another sign that things were going from bad to worse. But that wasn’t Decker’s fault. We all had to make decisions and survive the best we could in this world.

“You know what Decker, I’m happy for you. I hope this new place is perfect. But promise you will visit often, ok?”

Decker let out a long low whistle. “Thank you, friend. I was super worried about telling you because, well, it’s you. But I will visit as much as possible!”

And with that, Decker was off again. Garrick couldn’t be mad at his friend for finding a better home. But he would miss him.

“Did you catch that, Elly? Decker and Marge are moving to a new spot up the hillside.”

“I heard. Good for them. You never know, Garrick, with this new development coming in, I’m sure there will be many new friends for you to meet.”

Yeah, right. He had heard those stories too. While Decker and Garrick were complete opposites, their friendship still worked. There was an easy harmony between them. These new people coming in were different in a way that Garrick didn’t understand and probably never would. They were loud, pushy, and always on the go! Garrick preferred the simple life, one where you could be at peace taking in the fresh spring air or watching the rain fall on a cool autumn morning.

***Garrick preferred the simple life, one where you could be at peace taking in the fresh spring air or watching the rain fall on a cool autumn morning.***

No, Garrick would not like these new people one bit.

The roar of an engine broke the gentle forest sounds as a large white truck rolled to a stop a short distance away at the end of the old roadway. Two men tumbled out, dressed in bright vests. Garrick watched as they made their way to the rear of the vehicle and rummaged in the trunk, mumbling to each other. One of the men slung a small pack over his shoulder as the other stuffed some papers in his coat pocket.

*continued on page 13*

*continued from page 12*

Garrick was used to visitors in the area. Folks would come looking to get out of the city for a change of scenery and a breath of fresh air. But these men were different. Their faces were drawn and their mouths were set in tight lines as they stepped into the forest. They looked like trouble. Garrick stretched to his full height, not knowing what to expect.

As the men walked along the trail toward where Garrick stood, they spoke in hushed voices, pointing at different spots around them. They stopped a short distance away, looking at their maps and their gadgets, and then at Garrick.

One of the men, the older one, had a scraggly black beard and a bald head under his beige cap. He stared at Garrick as he tried smoothing his beard with one hand. He failed miserably. Instead of acknowledging Garrick, which would have been the polite thing to do, he turned to his partner with a hushed voice. “What do you think?”

His partner was a young man, his wild red hair escaping from under his hat like an erupting volcano. He looked back at their truck and then at his map. “I don’t know. This looks like the right spot.”

The older man, his eyes now set on Garrick, stood silently for a moment. He opened his mouth to speak but hesitated. Turning to his partner, he clapped him gently on the shoulder. “Kev, can you go back to the truck and start bringing down some of the equipment?”

“Sure thing, boss!” The red-haired man tipped his hat and then took off in a jog back to the truck.

Always on the go these people, Garrick thought.

The older man turned back to Garrick. As he closed the

distance between them he reached a hand out in greeting as he spoke quietly. “I hate to disturb you old fella but we are here on business. The boss says we’ve got to survey for a new subdivision.”

“What? No, you can’t. This is my home!”

The older man made no response, but as he continued to stare at Garrick, his eyes softened. Garrick could now see the dark circles under the man’s eyes and the deep sadness hidden under his hard exterior.

“I am truly sorry, old fella,” the man said as he rubbed his temples. “Ah, I wish we didn’t have to do this but we need more homes.”

“But this is my home. What is going to happen to me? To my family?” Garrick could not believe what he was hearing. This was his worst nightmare.

***“But this is my home. What is going to happen to me? To my family?”***

The older man said nothing. He simply stood in front of Garrick, his eyes drifting over the surrounding forest that would soon be turned to dust.

“It is nice here, isn’t it? So peaceful and calming.” The man let out a long sigh. “I don’t know, old fella. Do you ever get the feeling that you’re in the wrong place? Like you should be doing something else? Something more?”

Garrick had to think about that for a moment. He had always known his purpose in life and he had known from the start that this place, this community, was his home. As the man before him continued to scan the forest, Garrick suddenly realized that he recognized the sadness in the

*continued on page 14*



*continued from page 13*

man's eyes. It was the look of a lost child, alone in the woods, unsure of what to do next. Garrick's anger at the man evaporated.

"You know, many people who come to visit me come with troubled hearts and minds. But after taking a moment to breathe in the wonder of this place, they leave... reinvigorated. Why don't you try that?"

Turning his gaze towards the canopy above, the older man took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Garrick knew what he would hear: the quiet rustle of the leaves, the lilting calls of the songbirds, and the annoyed squeal of the red squirrel. He would hear the natural medicine of the forest.

At that moment, the young man let out a muffled cry back near their truck. Garrick turned his attention and saw Kev running towards them, pointing at something high in the trees, his eyes wide, binoculars dangling from his wrist.

"Boss! Joe! Come look! An Acadian Flycatcher! Just in the tree there."

"An Acadian..." The older man, Joe, snatched his backpack off his shoulder and pulled a small pocketbook out. He frantically flipped through the pages until he found what he was looking for. "Yep, here it is, the Acadian Flycatcher. Endangered. Well, I'll be damned. Good work, Kev." Joe grinned at his young partner and then turned to Garrick.

"It may be your lucky day, my friend," he whispered as he jabbed Garrick lightly in the side.

Joe turned back to his partner with a smile and began to walk to where the young man was now standing, binoculars sealed to his eye sockets, a grin from ear to ear plastered on his face. The two of them stood for quite a while, watching,

taking photos, and writing in their books. It was nearly dark before they got back in their truck and drove away.

Garrick watched as the lights of the truck gradually dimmed down the roadway and he was left once again with the simple quiet of his forest home.

"Is everything OK, Garrick?" Elly's soft voice brought Garrick back to his senses.

"I...I don't know. These men, they told me this whole area would be destroyed for a new subdivision, but then they saw something in the tree, told me I was lucky, and drove off." Garrick continued to stare at the spot, trying to process everything that had taken place.

"Good," Elly said.

"Good? What do you mean?"

"Don't get mad, but when I heard you interacting with that man I knew what was happening so I called Decker and asked him to fly back over. He was a bit reluctant at first but he knew what was at stake and he wanted to help."

"You sent Decker?" Garrick was speechless. Everyone in the forest knew that Marge and Decker were the only birds of their kind in this area but he never realized they were rare. No, not rare, endangered. Garrick felt a knot grow in his midsection. No wonder his good friend was looking for a safer place to live and raise his family, a place that was protected. They had no choice. But he had risked it all, risked discovery, to help Garrick.

Garrick reached out to Elly through the root and mycelium network that connected them, that connected their entire forest community. As the mother tree she was always looking out for everyone, but this was more than he could

*continued on page 15*



*continued from page 14*

have ever hoped for: a chance to save his home.

“Thank you, Elly. I don’t know what to say.”

“Well, that’s a first! And you are most welcome, you cranky old oak.”

\*\*\*

Joe pulled his white truck to a stop at the end of the dirt road. He sat there for a moment, hands gripped on the steering wheel. Was he really about to do this? The great oak tree stood tall in the distance as if waiting for him. He stepped out and started walking.

It was a gorgeous summer day. The city had been sweltering, the heat beating down from the sun above and radiating off the pavement below. It had been like sitting in an oven. But out here, in the shade of the forest, it was refreshing.

“Hello there, old fella.” Joe reached out to place a hand on the massive trunk of the old oak like he did that day a few months ago.

“It feels a bit odd but I had to come back and let you know the good news. After the flycatcher sighting, we started the paperwork for protecting this area. And it’s looking promising. A local conservation group is helping us figure things out. With any luck, you will never have to worry about folks like me coming to bug you ever again.”

Joe looked up at the oak’s great canopy and sighed. “Truth be told, I also wanted to thank you. I’ve been doing this job my whole life but I’ve spent too many years taking down old beauties such as yourself in the name of progress. But it’s not progress. Somehow you made me see that. It’s time to make a difference, to find a better way.”

Stooping down to sit at the base of the old oak Joe laid his head back on the trunk, soaking in the cool breeze and fresh scents of the forest. A smile spread across his face. He couldn’t explain it but it felt like the old oak understood and welcomed him. Joe let out a sigh and wondered at new beginnings as the leaves of the old oak rustled in the wind, the sharp song of the flycatcher echoing in response.



# ENTERING WRITING CONTESTS

BY CATINA NOBLE

**Writers often wonder whether or not it is a good idea to submit their writing to contests.**

After all, contests often require a submission fee, so if a writer enters multiple contests, the amount of money used for submission adds up. Is it worth it?

Each writer has to decide for themselves, but just over a decade ago I decided that I wanted to share my writing with the rest of the world. I started with poetry and then worked on a few books and short stories. I was skeptical about entering my work and paying fees, especially since I was what one would call a “starving artist.” Did I have a hope of making a long list, let alone placing anywhere in a contest?

I decided that it didn’t make sense for me to enter a lot of different contests. There were too many. I chose to put a limit of four to six contests a year as a way of getting my writing out there without breaking me financially.

One of the first contests I entered was the Canadian Authors Association National Capital Writing Contest. I entered the poetry section with my piece titled *You Can’t See Me*. Several months went by and I forgot about it until I received an email letting me know that I had made the short list in the poetry category. I had done it!

On the night of the awards ceremony, I sat in the front row to the side in case I needed a quick exit. There were six names on the list. Three of us would receive honourable

mentions and the other three would receive, third, second or first place. I held my partner’s hand as they announced the three honourable mentions. They didn’t call my name. My partner looked at me in awe, this meant I had placed. I couldn’t believe it. They announced third place, and then second, and it was not my name. First place! I couldn’t believe it. My partner nudged me toward the stage.

That night changed things for me as a writer. It boosted my self-confidence. Since then, I have kept writing, and I still enter three or four writing contests every year. I have received more honourable mentions for my poetry, and I have also published nine books and three chapbooks of poetry. Entering a contest changed my writing career. It set the foundation which keeps me grounded to this day.



# The Hope Chest

A SHORT STORY

BY CHRISTINE BEELEN

**Beth turned the key in the lock of her parent's home and pushed the heavy wooden door open. This time she knew there would be no one to embrace her and welcome her like the conquering hero as she stepped inside.**

The house had a dry, dusty smell as though its life had been drained away. A couple of weeks' worth of mail sat in a messy heap in the foyer and she scooped up the magazines and donor requests. Nothing looked urgent. She flipped through the jumble as she walked into the kitchen and dumped it on the table along with her keys and purse.

"Well, Mom, I'm home at last." Receiving no answer, she turned to the counter and found the kettle, filled it, and plugged it in. A smile crossed her face as she realized it was just what her mother would have done when she arrived home. There was always a cup of tea to start the conversation and whatever special treat her mother would have baked in honour of her visit. Just why hadn't she come home more often?

Beth worked in Vancouver for a television network, slowly working her way up to her dream job as news director. She had taken the junior reporting job when she graduated from journalism school, happy to get something, anything in her field. Few of her fellow students had been able to break

into the media directly. Beth knew she had been lucky and just a little determined by extending her apprenticeship at a station in Ottawa to a regular gig. When her mentor at the station received a call looking for a promising reporter, she got her chance. If her mother had been dismayed at how far away from home she would be, she covered it well.

Marjorie Edwards had been a widow for almost ten years when her only daughter moved away to Vancouver. She had stayed in the house she and her husband owned in the suburbs of Ottawa and continued her volunteer work and crafting. In the intervening years, she had flown across the country to visit Beth a couple of times and they had toured the city and gone over on the ferry to Victoria. Marjorie loved the massive arrays of flowers on the island, especially the Butchart Gardens, even though she was a lackadaisical gardener herself. Lately she had mentioned hiring a young man who was helping her with the heavy lifting.

"Do you think you'll be coming home sometime soon?" was often a question during their regular phone calls.

"I'm really busy, Mom. I'll try." Beth rarely found the time to make the trip back, even at the holidays.

*continued on page 18*

*continued from page 17*

“I’m the newest hire and have to take the holiday shifts.... I’m working on a big story and we’re waiting for the trial to end.... I’m next in line for a promotion and I don’t want them to think I’m not dedicated.”

There was always a good reason. It went on for years. Beth had slowly climbed the ladder and her responsibilities had increased. Her mother never complained about her reluctance to visit, always hopeful that the next time Beth’s answer would be different.

Of course, it didn’t help that Beth was in a relationship with the station manager. It had started when she was working on a story one night and Bob Mills had come into the station to go through some reports on his desk. They had chatted and laughed over the dinner he ordered in after calling his wife to say there was too much on his desk to leave for a while. Later he had dropped Beth at her apartment. Then Bob started showing up whenever he knew Beth was working late on a story. She was tall and attractive with a no-nonsense way about her. He could talk to her about all sorts of things. He was like that.

“I bet your boyfriend hates your job.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Beth was flattered he was showing an interest in her career. After several weeks she invited him up to her apartment for a drink. He was a good-looking man with an easy smile. Pouring the brand of scotch she knew he liked, she thought how crazy his wife was for not caring that he was ‘working late’ so often. She should have known better.

When her mother asked about her social life, Beth lied. She could hardly tell her that she had a boyfriend who was

not only 14 years older than her but also married. They could never go anywhere together. She suspected a few people at the station guessed about them. Beth knew he was never going to leave his wife and their three children, so she never asked. Being available when Bob was free also made getting to Ottawa difficult. In her defence, Beth thought, it’s not as though she had met too many eligible men before getting involved with a married man.

During this last week spent in Ottawa at the hospital, Beth had gone over all this in her mind and berated herself for neglecting the woman laying beneath the sterile sheets. Her mother looked so thin and frail. She stayed at a hotel close to the hospital only using the room to shower and change, choosing to sleep in the uncomfortable chair beside her mother’s bed. Why had she allowed herself to get so caught up in her work and a clandestine relationship going nowhere?

**“Why had she allowed herself to get so caught up in her work and a clandestine relationship going nowhere?”**

She wondered now if she would ever become news director given the questions that would be raised if she did. Could she feel she had really earned it? She had not heard from Bob this whole week.

Beth put the empty teacup by the sink. She looked around the kitchen and saw that it needed a coat of paint. The old Arborite counters were worn where her mother had scrubbed them clean day after day for years. Nothing had

*continued on page 19*



*continued from page 18*

been updated since her father died. It was the same old refrigerator, stove and dishwasher—the one that her mother rarely used. She always said there were so few dishes to do for just one person, she hated to bother. Beth was pretty sure the microwave she had bought had gone unused too.

She wandered into the dining room and saw the old china cabinet full of her grandmother's dishes and crystal. When she was growing up, they had only been brought out on special occasions like Christmas or Easter when the aunts and uncles would be there. The rest of the time, even on birthdays, the everyday dishes were “good enough”.

In the living room her mother's chair sat in line with the

*The rest of the time, even on birthdays, the everyday dishes were “good enough.”*

old television. Beside it was a knitting basket full of yarn and needles. A mitten, a set of needles and the finished mate lay on the coffee table. The sofa had an afghan draped over the back and a pillow that showed evidence that her mother had napped or perhaps even slept downstairs, not bothering or able to climb the stairs up to her own bed. Beth wasn't sure. She'd have to ask Mrs. Davison next door.

It had been the neighbour who had called Beth to tell her that her mother had been found on the kitchen floor. When she didn't answer the door one afternoon, Mrs. Davison had unearthed the spare key she had in her kitchen drawer. Marjorie had asked her to have it in case of emergency. This qualified. She had called the ambulance and then found Beth's telephone number.

“You had better come quick.”

“What happened?”

“I don't know for sure, but she had been feeling poorly these past few weeks. I suggested she go to the doctor, but you know your mother, she was stubborn. She waited too long and then the ambulance had to come take her away.”

Beth had called her boss to arrange some time off. She had assumed Bob would learn about her absence after the daily stand-up meeting, she could hardly call him at home!

At the hospital, the doctors talked in hushed tones by the bedside about her condition. Her mother's heart was starting to fail. It was a matter of time and they were not willing to measure that time in terms of years. Beth was devastated.

“Ahh, they called you,” her mother whispered when she saw her standing bedside.

“Of course!”

“I didn't want them to bother you. I know you are so busy at work.” Beth winced.

“Not too busy to come see you,” she started to say but knew in her heart she had said exactly that many times.

“I'm sorry Mom. I should have made the time to come more often. When we get you home, I promise I will come to visit on a regular basis.”

“That would be nice dear,” Marjorie closed her eyes and drifted off. Beth smoothed the covers and stroked her hand until the nurses came in.

“She's such a sweetie, she never complains about anything,” said the nurse as she and her colleague gently turned her mother. Beth realized the absolute truth of that

*continued on page 20*

*continued from page 19*

statement. Over the next few days the conversations had been limited as her mother was only awake briefly. After the stent surgery she started to slowly recover and gain strength. In a few days she would be released from the Heart Institute. There would be weeks of recovery and rehab.

“Oh, Mom, I do love you.”

“And I love you too. You are my greatest joy.” Beth looked down at the wedding and engagement rings fitting loosely on her mother’s fingers; she had never stopped wearing them. Beth felt a stab at her heart. Her mother had loved her father so much and she had dedicated her life to taking care of him and Beth.

She checked out of the hotel and went home to air out the house in preparation for her mother’s return. The lilacs were in full bloom and filled the air with their gorgeous scent and the tulips were nodding their full heads in the garden. The grass needed mowing but otherwise everything outside seemed okay.

Beth climbed the stairs to check out her old bedroom. Everything was the same as it had been the last time home. Her single bed with its frilly bedspread, the bureau, bookcases, her desk and even the teddy bear she had never allowed herself to toss. She remembered leaving the room a bit of a mess last time she had been home but clearly her mother had tidied up, ready for her next visit.

The guest room was pristine too. Her mother’s sewing machine was in the corner, covered of course. Beth suspected she hadn’t used it in quite a while. She brushed

her hand over the side table and found a pretty blue thread. Maybe she was wrong. Her mother made amazing quilts. There was one on the bed in here in the Grandmother’s Fan pattern, one of Beth’s favourites.

At last, she stepped into her parent’s room, she had never been able to just call it Mom’s room. It, too, was neat and tidy. There was her mother’s robe hanging on the back of the door and Beth knew if she slid her hands under the pillow, she would find her mother’s nightgown. The cedar chest stood at the end of the bed as it always had. When she was a little girl, it had been a mysterious and forbidden place especially at Christmas time. Beth suspected later that Santa had delivered more than one present to its scented hold. She lifted the lid and to her surprise found it full of boxes and bags. She frowned as she recognized some of the labels. When she travelled and at birthdays, Christmas, and Mother’s Day she always sent her mother expensive gifts. Maybe it was to assuage her guilt for not getting home more often. Her mother would always react the same way.

“Oh, you should have kept your money dear. I don’t need anything.”

When she had visited and expressed disappointment that her mother was not wearing the beautiful sweater found in that lovely boutique or the great silk scarf from the market in Amsterdam, she would ask why, and her mother’s response would always be the same too. “It is too beautiful... too expensive.... too good for every day. I am waiting for a special occasion.” Now Beth found, she had never used them. There had also been some practical gifts

*continued on page 21*



*continued from page 20*

to replace the worn towels and linens that her mother used daily. But here they were. She spied an envelope on the chest's tray. Her name was written across the front in her mother's neat handwriting. She pulled out a single sheet and read,

*Dear Beth,*

*If you are reading this, I am probably gone. Don't be sad. I have lived a good life. Your father and I were so pleased when we finally had you and we were so proud of your accomplishments. Unfortunately, your father never got to see your success at work.*

*I have been alone a long time, too long. Don't wait to find someone special to share your life. Your job may keep you busy now but later when it is over you will be lonely. I put everything into our family and when it was gone, I had nothing to keep me busy except volunteering for others and my needlework.*

*You will recognize the items in this box. I was always disappointed we didn't fill a hope chest for you. I hope these special things will make up for that.*

*I always loved you with all my heart,  
Mom*

Beth wiped away her tears and slipped the letter back into its envelope. She placed it back on the tray and closed the lid of the chest. After bringing up her bag to her old room, she unpacked and tucked the suitcase under her bed. Then she went down into the kitchen and found, as she knew she would, a casserole in the freezer. She set the

table with her grandmother's best dishes, poured a glass of wine into a crystal goblet and while the casserole reheated in the oven, she made a list of the calls she would have to make now that she had made her decision.

It would be 2:00 p.m. in Vancouver, the rush for the late afternoon news not quite started. Her first call was to her news director on her direct line. She hoped she would understand.



# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

For our spring poetry edition of *Byline*

## Topic: I Didn't Expect It

Where did you see an out-of-place burst of colour?

When did someone take you by surprise?

What lesson did you learn out of an unforeseen experience?

Who made you say, "Wow!"?

Send your original poem to [Byline](#).

DEADLINE: March 19, 2023

# SEND US YOUR NEWS

Do you have a new book?

Have you had a short story or a poem published?

Are you presenting a training session or interesting talk?

Let us know.

[Byline](#)

