

by Noelle Sterne

Shortly after my divorce, in the lingering details of final separation, I went to the basement of the now-for-sale house to get my last cartons. The new, bittersweet freedom nudged me to reawaken my old dream of writing, and files of half-finished manuscripts rested here, waiting for resuscitation. I descended the stairs with an unpleasant mix of familiarity and no longer belonging. Rummaging in the half-dark, I pushed away discarded furniture and half-used paint cans.

My cartons were wedged in a corner, and my eye caught a box marked "Mom." During her final illness, having thrashed through the inevitable generational battles, my mother and I became close. After clearing out her apartment, I kept some of her things.

I sat on the damp cement floor, hardly remembering what was in the box, and opened it. On the top, tied with gritty string, lay a packet encrusted with dust like old frosting. I brushed it off and broke the string.

In my hands separated two music scores. Their blue-gray covers had faded in spots to yellowed patches, and they emanated the musty, sweet smell of old books, victims of disuse and little air.

The scores were for a Brahms symphony and the Mendelssohn violin concerto. They were the size of small paperbacks, meant to fit easily into a briefcase or suit pocket when you went to a concert. You held them unobtrusively near the seat lights to follow the orchestra. I'd often seen my father slip a score into his jacket before he and my mother went to their New York Philharmonic subscription concerts.

I opened one of the scores. Inside the front flap, with a start, I recognized my mother's handwriting. Attending to her affairs in her last frail years, I'd gotten very used to her hand. The script, written decades earlier, was exactly the same, letters thin and wobbly like a child's:

April 5

Many happy birthdays Darling.

J.

Darling? Were these the parents I knew? She'd never called him that in all the years of my growing up. I could just make out by the faded year that they'd been married for two years, five years before their first child, my brother. The bloom was still on, and the hope.

Like every new couple, they'd started out full of wedding sparkle and family's beaming smiles. The unaccustomed feelings of love, they must have felt sure, would activate the magnificent aspirations each had held close long before they'd ever met. He would be the great violinist, she the great painter. And during the first two years that prompted my mother's dust-caked birthday wish, those dreams still crackled bright as virtuoso cadenzas.

But soon the "happiness," veneer at best, couldn't conceal my mother's frantic attempts at perfect wifedom, thwarting her creative needs or my father's despair at the corrosion of his life's potential. In single young manhood, his dream propelled him to walk miles uphill to school to save the bus money for music lessons and work nights to buy his first third-hand violin. His fierce desire thrust him further — to the miracle of acceptance at Juilliard and dared hope of the dream reaching life.

But, as with so many couples, the jolts of adulthood insinuated and took over. And here he was, freighted with wife, children and a deadening administrative job that just supported the newly congratulated four-bedroom split-level.

Birthday Wish



Even so, he tried to regain the dream, practicing the Mendelssohn furiously on Sunday mornings and losing himself in the pocket scores at two-hour concerts. But neither they nor my mother – nor certainly the annoyance of children – could salve his psychic wounds.

These surfaced in many ways. He was tall, always a little too heavy, and, as my wide child eyes beheld him, a great stone edifice. His thunder-threatening countenance permeated the household, his face blackened sky. He wielded no physical threat, but his colossal silences and bullying rages kept my brother and me frozen inside the house and out as much as we could manage. My mother took refuge in women friends, religion, Bach cantatas and the furtive easel and palette set up in the guest room closet.

Shortly before she died, she told me that sex had gone in six months, and "Darling" soon after. The rest was endurance. They stayed together as casualties of social etiquette, inertia, fear and inbred precepts of loyalty. Locked in the struggle against each other, they denied themselves, took it out on their children and lived the façade of suburban contentment. Until one May night, a month past his fifty-third birthday, after a harsh exchange and complaint of heartburn, he collapsed at midnight on the master bathroom floor.

My mother, too, paid her dear prices. She discovered early, contrary to what she'd been taught, that love and martyrdom do not conquer all. Yet she stumbled through her marriage, as if more cooking, tasteful curtains, clean children, placemats from Bloomingdale's and constant attempts at placation would assuage his great hole of despair and somehow atone for her own "self-ish" need to create.

Although she cheered the rising women's movement, it came too late to penetrate her upbringing. So she spent the entire twenty-four years of table-setting and Sunday pot roasts denying her artist's soul, until released by the last phrase of the vow.

After my father died, for the rest of her life, my mother avoided all possibility of another relationship; sure any other man would again stifle and drain her. Depriving herself of male companionship, maybe even love, instead she took a few painting classes, went out with women friends, listened to more Bach cantatas and clung to her swallowed rage.

For many years, she seemed unaffected, but the rage demanded payment. It festered, spread and weakened her beyond medical reclamation. In her last month, at 79, she finally voiced it. "I was angry at him all our married life. I never really forgave him."

Overtaken by these memories, I sighed as I sat on the cold floor in the dank basement air. Yes, the scores evoked bitter recollections, but now, with their shocking tender birthday wish, they felt precious in my hands. I thought of the emptiness I would now face, and the pain of my failed relationship. I thought of my ex-husband, his thwarted desires for success, and my own history of undeclared dreams and secret resentments. Could I somehow transmute the litany of wrongs done me, and still-raw anger, into forgiveness of him? And recognition of my part in our debacle?

I had to. My mother's choices had ensnared her, and the only way to disinherit was to face myself. Only then might I still nurture my writer's soul, even find a true Darling. And on today's saner terms, beyond the old sacrosanct roles of woman and wife, which, as my mother sadly proved, could be lethal. Maybe this, and not her household items and few pieces of jewelry, was her real legacy.

I brushed off the scores, tucked them into my handbag, and closed the carton. Then I walked back upstairs and left the house. Maybe I'd return for the rest of my things, maybe not. I knew I'd recovered the most important of them and, with moist eyes, silently thanked my mother for her birthday wish.

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The Travel Belles

Local writer, and world traveler, Margo Millure, has created a wonderful new blog all about travel. The excerpt below is a taste of how she defines a "travel belle."

Whether six or 106, a travel belle likes getting out of town. She would live large on a trip to Florence or Rome, even if they are the Florence and Rome in South Carolina and Georgia respectively. Mostly she's dollar wise and penny foolish, but someday she would like to do the opposite for a week or two in France or Italy.

Sometimes she plans obsessively, but she also knows when it's time to fly by the seat of her pants. Occasionally she surprises herself. Oh yeah – she doesn't have to be from the South!

Her passport is optimistically kept current. There is no trust fund.

Visit www.thetravelbelles.com for more!

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letter from the editor

As most of us do who live along the Grand Strand, I love the beach. Growing up in Charlotte, N.C., my family visited various North and South Carolina beaches several times a year, and my parents finally moved our family here in the '70s. Photos taken on one beach or another fill my albums and serve as a chronicle of my life. From sunrise swims with my father to building sand castles with my own children, the ocean and her soft, sandy beaches have been a constant presence throughout the years. Today I still go to the beach several times a week; to walk or run, to think, to watch the sunrise and, yes, to sit in the sun and read (under an umbrella and covered in sun block). Just the sound of the waves and the smell of salty air brings me peace. I have no extended vacation planned this year, only a couple of long weekends away, but living near the beach means a mini-vacation is always waiting when I need an escape.

I hope you enjoy this issue as much we enjoyed putting it together. It'll be even better if you take it to the beach!

Happy Mother's Day,

Lustie



cover artist

Femme Florale, by Sybil Alphano

Sybil has been painting for as long as she can remember. For her, creating is a chance to meditate and share different perspectives. She has found art to be an amazing tool to bring people together. In her senior year of high school she took several inspiring art classes, which led to her decision to pursue a B.A. in Art Studio at Coastal Carolina University. Since gradu-

ating college in 2005, Sybil has had several jobs that revolved around art. She was an assistant curator at an art gallery, an art educator/tour guide at a children's art museum, and is currently an art instructor at Abiding Village Urban Arts Center.

Sybil enjoys making custom artwork, murals, prints, greeting cards, personalized gifts, and has recently fallen in love with hand painted jewelry making. You can find her artwork for sale at www.liveloovecreate.net and in various local stores in Myrtle Beach.

When she isn't focusing on her artwork, she enjoys spending time with friends and family, traveling, surfing, playing tennis, attending cultural events and anything involving the outdoors. Contact the artist through her website or sybilalphano@mac.com.

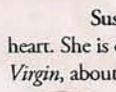
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contributing writers

Connie Barnard refers to her life as 50 years of slow-growing epiphany. After almost 30 years of teaching English composition to high school and college students, she has joyfully returned to writing herself.



Margaret Bishop and her husband, Matt, reside in Camden, S.C. along with their three children – David, Olivia and Thomas. Margaret is a stay at home mother and freelance writer.



Susan DeBow is a Midwest writer with a Southern heart. She is currently working on her second book, *The Irish Virgin*, about her exploits in Ireland.



Melissa Face lives in Virginia with her husband and dog. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Chicken Soup for the Soul and Cup of Comfort*. E-mail Melissa at writermface@yahoo.com.

A native South Carolinian, Lisa Hamilton is the director of the First Presbyterian Church Preschool and Kindergarten. Of course she loves reading, but also finds time for cooking and walking her dog, Hurley.



Carol Joseph is a freelance writer who lives in Naples, Florida. She writes a column entitled "Thinking Out Loud" for her local newspaper. She has won numerous awards for advertising writing and creativity.

Caroline Misner was born in a country that, at the time, was known as Czechoslovakia, and immigrated to Canada. To see more of her work, visit thewritersezine.com, truepoetmagazine.com and bewilderingstories.com. Caroline currently lives in Georgetown, Ontario, where she continues to read, write and follow her muse.



Linda O'Connell is a preschool teacher and freelance writer from St. Louis, Missouri. As Linda waltzed through the decades, she discovered her age of elegance was in her forties, but she isn't complaining. Linda resides in the Midwest but her heart and soul hang out at the beach.

Judie Schaal is a 31 year resident of the Grand Strand. She is married to her favorite golf pro, Gary. She has two grown children and three grandchildren. She has written for *The Sun News* as a tennis columnist and *On the Green*.



Diane Stark is a wife, a mother of five and a freelance writer. Her work has appeared in publications like *Chicken Soup for the Soul: A Tribute to Moms*. She loves to write about her family and her faith.

Noelle Sterne, writer, editor and writing coach, regularly publishes essays and craft pieces, with articles forthcoming in *11.11*, *Writing World*, and *The Writer*. An agent is currently reading her handbook of practical spirituality, *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams*.



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