

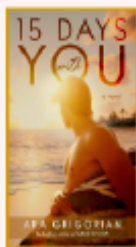


# The Valley Scribe

Newsletter of the San Fernando Branch of the California Writers Club

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Ara Gregorian's Latest Novel:

## Speaker Ara Grigorian Knows How to Find Your Story's Pulse.

Ara Grigorian, author of international award-winning books, *Game of Love* and *Ten Year Dance*, will lead a two-hour workshop on Saturday, February 1, at the Motion Picture and TV Fund, 23388 Mulholland Drive, in the Saban Community Room. The event begins at 1 p.m. and ends at 4 p.m. Cost for visitors attending our workshop is \$20 per person. Members are free.

Grigorian regularly leads workshops at writers conferences and works as a technology executive in the entertainment industry where he “defines, leads, and executes technical strategies that solve real problems, with a focused eye on the future and the evolution of organizations.” He’s also a public speaker, and his novels center around “choices, relationships and second chances.” Grigorian’s latest novel, **15 Days with You**, is available for pre-order. This event will be Gregoian’s second presentation to the CWC-SFV membership.

Of his responsibility as a workshop facilitator, Grigorian says, “I don’t speak theory. I speak from things that work. I am also a story coach, so what I teach are tools that have helped my clients have breakthroughs. I’ve been there, I am there, and I struggle like all other writers, but I have also found the tools and the inspiration that keeps me going through it all.”

At this February workshop, *Story Beats*—

*Your Story’s Heart Beat*, which runs from 2 - 4 p.m., Grigorian will share how attendees can become better storytellers. He began teaching workshops at writers’ conferences in 2014.

“For me, story is everything,” Grigorian adds. “Beautifully constructed sentences are great. But I’ve seen people who can write beautiful prose without understanding what it is about story that hooks a reader. My Story Beats reveal the heartbeat of a story.”

Additional information about Grigorian and his books are available at: <https://www.aragrigrorian.com/>.

The California Writers Club welcomes writers in all genres, and at all stages of their careers. Monthly meetings are held on the first Saturday of the month. To attend workshops, programs and other events, or to learn more about our club’s events and activities for writers, visit <http://cwc-sfv.org/>.

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Ara Grigorian

# ALL FOR ONE AND ONE FOR ALL!



**Bob Okowitz**

We started the year off with a big bang. Novelist Laurie Stevens discussed how she uses trauma to develop characters and conflict in her novels.

She has written the Gabriel McRay detective series which focuses on a detective who works through his trauma by working on difficult cases. She mentioned that a person who is totally 'evil' can't have conflict because he has no remorse or regret for what he has done. With this kind of character, the conflict develops between the perpetrator and the person trying to catch him.

Gary Wosk and Colin Gallerger helped out with refreshments as Alan Wells was on vacation. Thanks for the help, guys. The coffee and snacks were appreciated.

We had another used book sale today as a fundraiser. We will continue these sales for a few months. Due to increases in costs across the board plus wanting to bring you excellent (but sometimes expensive) speakers, we anticipate dipping into our reserve this year. In order to avoid doing this, we are asking for donations. An appeal letter went out last week and it is reprinted on the next page of the Scribe. Please help as much as you can!

Rita Brown ran another prompt ex-

ercise session which often result in new stories for the next month's Scribe. The prompts are great for getting our imaginations in gear.

Last month, in my acknowledgment of our 2019 speakers, I forgot to mention and thank SFV member Ester Shifren, an author, lecturer and experienced workshop leader. Ester shared several pointers on how a published author might win and hold the attention of an audience when marketing a book.

In 2020, I'm looking forward to the rest of the workshop speakers that Lori Hamilton has arranged. Especially interesting will be the return of Ara Grigorian who will do a two hour lecture on writing a great novel. I read his book *The Game of Love*, which was a story about a top ranked female tennis player. A great read.


Lori is still recovering from her back surgery, so she may not be able to attend the next few workshops. I'm sure she would love to hear from you.

And finally, Jenny Jordan needs to get another Critique Group going. Ed Reynolds is our newest member and wants to be in a critique group. He has a couple of nonfiction manuscripts he needs to polish. If you are interested in being in a new Critiques Group, give Jenny a call.

I hope to see you all at our the February workshop.

Bob Okowitz





Dear CWC-SFV member,

Membership in CWC-SFV provides you with exceptional monthly speakers, access to critique groups and the camaraderie of exchanging ideas with fellow writers. Our costs have been rising but we have maintained the membership fees at the same level. Help us balance the budget by considering a donation.

If you attended one of the last few monthly meetings, you are aware we have been selling donated books. To date we have raised \$150 in our used book sale.

While we plan to continue the used book sale, we will not meet our goal of raising \$1500 by June 2020 through this avenue alone.

We are appealing for donations. If you value what the club provides you, please consider sending a check to our PO Box or making a cash donation at the next meeting. Every dollar we raise counts towards allowing us to continue to provide high-quality programming.

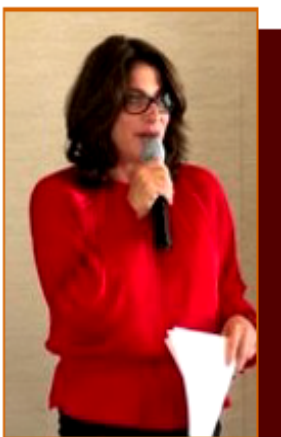
Sincerely,  
Bob Okowitz  
CWC-SFV President  
Pat Avery  
CWC-SFV Treasurer and Secretary

Please send your checks to:

Pat Avery  
PO Box 9023  
Calabasas, CA 91372



# Laurie Stevens Pointed Out Elements of Mystery Crime Novels



Laurie Stevens

Our January speaker, Laurie Stevens, immediately confided to our Saban Room audience that she was a “hybrid author.” In other words, she had written and published books both independently and through a contract with a publishing house.

She has successfully swung both ways, and is very familiar with the advantages and disadvantages of both types of publishing. She enlarged on her hybrid status:

“Becoming an author by any path is never easy. There is no “right” way to be an author. Both paths are valid ways to make a living as an author. Pursuing hybrid authorship means pursuing two parallel paths at the same time, which is why many authors pursue one path first, and the other later.

Her credits as a hybrid author certainly do her credit, as I learned while perusing her press release.

Stevens is the author of the award-winning Gabriel McRay psychological suspense series, and is also a playwright and co-producer of the musical *Follow Your Dreams* and an author of many published articles and anthology stories. And let’s not forget her song-writing abilities and performances which can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyjLLAlxeqM>

In her power-point presentation, Stevens immediately divided the mystery genre into three sub-genres: mystery, thriller, and psycho-thriller.

Each type of mystery novel has its own way of presenting a suspenseful story. Of course, all stories and plots have common elements: introduction of characters and a problem; build of tension; a climax; de-escalation and ending. But Stevens demonstrated — see the illustration — the ways each crime story genre uses story elements or plot outlines in different ways, according to their sub-genre.



## Mystery

- a crime starts the story
- the reader is one step behind the investigator
- a steady input of clues

## Thriller Mystery

- slower lead into the action
- the reader is one step ahead of the characters
- clues and background information are slowly revealed

## Psycho-thriller Mystery

- main character feels a growing threat from a dangerous psychopath
- reader is kept off-balance by unforeseen and malicious actions
- the psycho’s mind is a stumbling block ...

Our guest stressed the need for any author, whether self or commercially published, to always hold to professional standards. She told us, “I love to research. In preparation for my crime books, I’ve prowled library stacks, museums’ back rooms, contacted detectives, police experts and forensic professionals ... and yes, I’ve watched an autopsy. A good writer knows she must be a professional. So go the extra mile and try to anticipate and research everything you need to know about your characters. Try to see them and hear their voices. Make them come alive in your imagination.”

Multi-talented Stevens could have lectured on a multitude of topics, but on that January afternoon, her talk on the mystery book genre entertained and enlightened her listeners. I appreciated her straightforward description of a writer: “It’s no good aspiring to be a writer. If you write, then you are one.”

Nothing mysterious about that definition.

Write on, SFV writers.

**-Kathy Highcove**

photo of Laurie Stevens by Ester Benjamin Shifren

## Submission Guidelines for the 2020 California Writers Club *Literary Review*

The submission window for 2020 is open from December 15, 2019 to February 29, 2020. Submissions are accepted by email only.

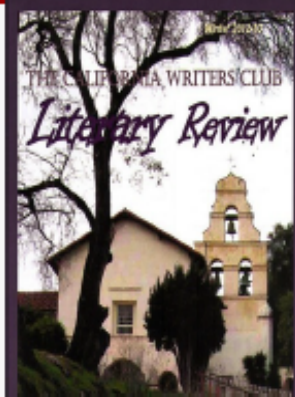
Follow the directions carefully, not omitting any steps. You must download, save as a PDF, complete, and then submit the completed form.

We do not accept submissions with incomplete forms.

### What do *Literary Review* editors accept?

We're looking for your best work — fiction, poetry, memoir, and essay, including excerpts from previously published writing — for publication in the 2020 California Writers Club *Literary Review*. Submissions are open to current members of California Writers Club and will be accepted from December 15, 2019 through February 29, 2020. Works will be reviewed and selected for possible publication by a panel of acquisition editors through a blind judging process. You will be notified by email as to whether your piece will be included in the 2020 *Literary Review* shortly before publication in autumn of 2020.

We're looking for good writing of any genre, style or topic. Romance, mystery, sci-fi and fantasy will be given the same consideration as more "serious" works. Lighter themes and humor are always welcome. Take care to polish your work and make it the very best you can. The only things we will reject outright are pieces that proselytize, are libelous, or contain gratuitous vulgarity. We accept ex-



cerpts from previously published work provided that they conform to the guidelines, that you hold the copyright, and that you indicate the initial source and date.

### How should my work be formatted?

Follow standard professional manuscript preparation practice such as indented paragraphs and correct formatting of dialog.

### Will my work be altered or edited?

By submitting to the *Literary Review*, you are granting the editors the right to do light editing to correct grammar, spelling and typos, to preserve historical accuracy, and maintain consistency with the *Literary Review* style guide.

### When you submit:

The \$10 fee covers ONE prose piece (not two as in some previous years). For poetry, two submissions of up to 30 lines each may be made for each \$10 payment. Limit of three prose pieces at \$10 each, or six poems (\$10 for each two poems).

Critiques will not be given. We encourage you to workshop and polish your writing before submitting it to the *Literary Review*.

If we accept the piece, you are giving permission for the work to appear in our print edition as well as in our online edition.

The Submission Form must accompany each piece you are submitting.



## Responses to the January prompts ...

It was at that age:

by Nancy Friedman

...that I realized I was a shape-shifter. I was only four when I spilled orange juice into our grand piano at home. Knowing I'd get into trouble, I instinctively changed into a tricycle and pedaled next door to hide in our neighbor's garage. Of course my mom found me right away. She was so excited at my new ability that she forgot to punish me.



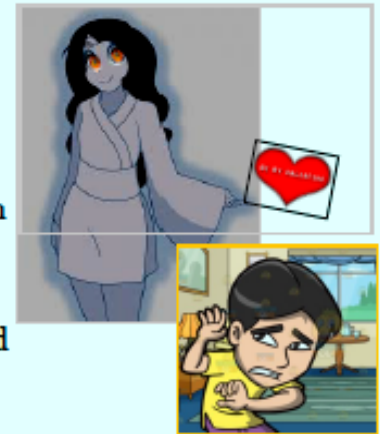
My parents, who you may have guessed, were humans who also possessed magical abilities. They never punished me for using my abilities but taught me that magic comes with responsibility. I'm still learning that, I guess.



Throughout the years I got very good at causing trouble at school and then shape-shifting my way out of it. I could turn into a table or a water fountain or even the principal's coat rack. I never could get very small though. As I grew, I could only do shapes that were roughly the same size as me.

I enjoyed a great childhood but when I got interested in boys, my magical power was a real handicap. I couldn't try too many tricks on boys I liked if I wanted them to like me back.

I'm only 17 now and I've still got lots to learn. At least that's what my mom said yesterday when I shape-shifted into a ghost and scared the daylights out of this really nasty boy. Well, he deserved it!



## Our Tehran Tour Guides

by Ed Reynolds

That day, I felt my guides no longer carried my fellow travelers and I safely on our tour of Tehran. Our vehicle had blacked-out windows but the demonstrators outside the former US Embassy carried signs – written in English - that were very anti-American.

I thought that our guides, who drove the van and provided the commentary, shouldn't drive us past the building. Today was the anniversary of the takeover in 1979 and there were demonstrators. The day before we had safely driven to a site where we could see the Embassy just a block away and there were no demonstrators - just anti-American signs on the walls. I felt it would have been safer to drive us close to the Embassy on that day. Fortunately, the demonstrators didn't notice that our van was full of Americans and consequently we were able to pass by without incident.

After the tour, we didn't give our guides a five star rating on the critique sheet.



## PICKED UP FROM THE AIRPORT

by Rich Peter

Barbara got out of her car hesitantly as Julie jumped off the curb and encircled her with a big warm hug. "Thanks for coming to pick me up. You saved me a bunch of time." Julie's bags were stowed in the back, the two women got into their seats and the car lurched from the arrival gate into traffic.



As they left the air terminal Barbara said, "I have been keeping a secret you might want to hear. I just murdered someone we both know very well."

"What?"

"It's true." Barbara said. "Just after you left for Atlanta I used your car to do it and "accidentally" left your spare keys at the scene. Convenient, don't you think? He'd just gotten there and had started straightening up for when you got back. I'd already been to your house and got your hair brush, Kleenex from your waste basket with your lipstick on it. I even got your DNA from your unmentionables in your clothes hamper. I am sure he's mixed in there somewhere too. It's all there now, in your secret hide-a-way apartment. He never got to leave, bet you never figured!

"Police should be looking for me, but they'll find

you! Blood from the scene is in your car. Imagine, even your favorite kitchen knife is hidden under the rear seat floor mat, and in your house the blood stains you hurriedly tried to clean up before you left. Remember? I'm sure don't! He didn't show up in Atlanta, did he?"

"I ... I can't believe it ... you're making this all up."

"Did he call? Did you miss him? Oh, I am sure you did."

"Where are you getting all this?"

"And just think I'm doing you a favor picking you up and taking you there."

"We're friends," Julie pleaded. "This is a joke, right? God, you're scaring me."

"That's intentional. You should be scared! The police have been to your house and your hide-a-way. They're waiting for you. You screwed our friendship and you screwed my husband.

"Oh, you were clever, it took me nearly a year to figure it out. Justin and I were happy until *you* came along. Now you're *mine!*"

## BENT DOUBLE, LIKE OLD BEGGARS UNDER SACKS

by Rich Peter

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, they had been leading their camels for seventeen days.

Unlike the men, the camels stood tall and erect. It would be two more full days through the Morocco desert before the next water hole. They slept by day and traveled at night, two brothers and one son of fourteen.

The dark around their eyes showed their dehydration and only conviction would take them the rest of the way. Their joints creaked as they stood from their restless slumber. That seemed loud against the baying of the obstinate camels getting up from their kneeling.

As the sun set, they began the day's journey. Their long shadows raked over the wind ripples in the sand



and the men prayed that this time there would be no wind. Should the sand rise from howling gusts they would be blinded and that would mean loss of direction and certain death.

The boy up ahead set the pace, he being the slowest. His father second and his father's brother third.

They plodded east with the fading sun at their backs and watched their own shadows stretch into the distance and slowly fade into the darkness. Then there were only stars to follow.



# The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest

Last month, SFV member Ray deToumay sent me the winning samples of the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest. I'd never heard of this literary contest, but Ray often sends me interesting material, so I checked it out. Then I read the contest's winning entries, and laughed a lot. So ... I invite those of you with a nerdy lit sense of humor to browse through the contest's website. And read some perfectly horrible and hilarious writing ... And BTW, the following text is copied from Wiki.

The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest (BLFC) is a tongue-in-cheek contest, held annually and sponsored by the English Department of San Jose State University in San Jose, California. Entrants are invited "to compose the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels" – that is, deliberately bad.

According to the official rules, the prize for winning the contest is "a pittance". The 2008 winner received \$250, while the 2014 winners' page said the grand prize winner received "about \$150". The contest was started in 1982 by Professor Scott E. Rice of the English Department at San Jose State University and is named for English novelist and playwright Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, author of the much-quoted first line "It was a dark and stormy night". This opening, from the 1830 novel *Paul Clifford*, continues:

*It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents, except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.*

The first year of the competition attracted just three entries, but it went public the next year, received media attention, and attracted 10,000 entries. There are now several subcategories, such as detective fiction, romance novels, Western novels, and purple prose. Sentences that are notable but not quite bad enough to merit the Grand Prize or a category prize are awarded Dishonorable Mentions.

If you also have a lit-nerdy sense of humor, you might check out their website and read some winning paragraphs of dreadful writing. URL: <https://www.bulwer-lytton.com/2019> Here's a sampling:

–KH

## 2019 Grand Prize

Space Fleet Commander Brad sat in silence, surrounded by a slowly dissipating cloud of smoke, maintaining the same forlorn frown that had been fixed upon his face since he'd accidentally destroyed the phenomenon known as time, thirteen inches ago.

Maxwell Archer, Mt Pleasant, Ontario, Canada

There are thirteen more categories with winners and also-rans in each genre.

## 2019 Winner for Vile Puns

After purchasing an oval Chinese frying pan at the diminutive British aristocrat's yard sale, Nigel realized that he'd just taken a long wok off a short Peer.

Bart King, Portland, OR

## 2019 Winner for Westerns

"Yeehaw, boys, and so long," called Eugene 'Bullettooth Dynamite' Jones as he rode off into the torrential downpour on his 32-inch-tall miniature horse, Kevin, hiding a frown because he knew deep down in his heart he had yeed his last haw.

Stephanie Karnosh, Springboro, OH





### Michael relates how this song took shape.

Usually, before I compose a song, I figure out what I want to hear and then, by ear, find the notes on the keyboard. I don't use music theory—I just go by the sound.

I never sit down and say, "It's time to try to write a song." Sometimes days or weeks without my writing any music or songs.

With this song, I just woke up from a nap and thought of a nice piano arpeggios. Then I imagined how someone would sing along to it.

My song's story: I once read an article about unmarked graves that are usually located outside of big cities where runaway children were buried.

Many of these poor children didn't survive a city's mean streets. To the outside world, their lives didn't mean anything, but to them being alive was everything.

Then I imagined people who had been witnesses to the children's hidden lives. Their spirits sing this song over them from some dimension of happiness.

In this song, I also imagine that these children, who didn't matter to anyone when they were alive, are big celebrities in the afterlife because of their courage.

So I had all those thoughts about street children as a song already, and when the tune came to me, I thought, *This music would go great with that theme.*

I tried to find lyrics for it and that's how my *Mary* song was composed.

**Michael Rains**

A bitter cup is where your life was poured from,  
It wasn't found among the buttercups,  
Reflections of the lies,  
Deep within your eyes,  
Will any even look there anymore.

Ashes fall  
Like rain back where they came from.  
When you're gone,  
Will anybody notice.

We've all heard  
Whispers from a place that's singing.

O Mary, may the sun shine down on you, on you.  
O Mary, may the sun shine just for you.  
You've never seen a smile,  
But you will in a while,  
Believe us when we say he's watching over you.

O Mary, may the sun shine down on you.  
O Mary, may the sun shine just for you.  
Believe us when we say  
That he still knows your name,  
And you will shine forever and a day, a day.

And though the only thing you knew was darkness.  
Your heart was always reaching for the light.  
Was it a marvelous thing  
When you tried to sing?  
Does anyone remember how it goes?

In your mind  
The stars all join your chorus.  
Did you know  
You've never been alone?

The light you sought  
Was also reaching for you only.

O Mary, now the sun will shine always.  
O Mary, now the sun shines on your face.  
Your life was not a waste  
And you will see his face.  
O Mary, let the sun shine down on you!

O Mary, now the sun will shine always..  
O Mary, now the sun shines on your face  
Like you he was made low, so low,  
With blood that washed your clothes.  
O Mary, may the sun shine down on you!

O Mary, may the sun shine down on you.  
O Mar, may the sun shine just for you, for you.  
Your life's a bitter sea,  
Still something shines beneath.  
O Mary, may the sun shine down on you!

**Listen to the music for this song at: [rainingday.bandcamp.com/](http://rainingday.bandcamp.com/)**

# First Time

by Jenny Jordan

I'm late. Again! I hate myself for being late, especially since it's my first time here. I have to make a good impression, because this is really important to me.

*Not so important to show up on time. Just turn around and go home, I tell myself. Never mind that. Get in there and check it out. You don't have to stay. You don't even have to talk to anyone.*

I'm nervous as hell, and I probably don't belong here anyway. Part of me has always wanted to expand my skill, and I've run out of excuses. So here I am, despite myself.

There's no one at the check-in desk, but I see a small stack of blank "Hello My Name Is" stickers and a couple of markers. I choose green, scribble my name and stick it on my shirt. I look down. It's crooked. "Really?" I ask myself. I'm batting a thousand today. No time to write a new one. I take a deep breath and walk through the still-open doors, to a room full of folks at three rows of long tables. Some are chatting, some are checking their phones, waiting for the meeting to start. *Whew, I just made it. Maybe no one will notice me.*

I scan the room, looking for a place to sit. My arms are wrapped around myself, shoulders concave. This is my invisible pose. It doesn't work. A woman catches my eye from across the room and walks over.

"HI! Is this your first time here?"

Wow, she's loud. But her blue eyes twinkle and her smile is sincere. I nod.

"Here, have a seat here. We're just about to start. There's a great speaker today, one of our longtime members." She bustles away, back to her side of the room.

No one looks up as I sit at the end of the table.

*What am I doing here? I'm a fraud. Look at everyone! They look so... in place. At home. Experienced. God, I hate first days. Reminds me of high school.*

I shudder, and exhale.

The meeting starts. The President makes some announcements, and our speaker is introduced. Her resume is impressive. She's written more than a few books. She is a lovely speaker, engaging with a touch of humor. She is encouraging and thoughtful.

*Maybe I can do this. Maybe.* My nervousness is set aside as I bask in her warmth and knowledge, as if in

front of a fire on a cold afternoon.

There's a handout, and we're asked to write for a few minutes.

*Okay, I can do this.* I knew it was coming - it was on the flyer when I first signed up. The knot in my stomach starts to uncurl as I think about what to write. No one has noticed that I don't belong here. Not yet, anyway.

After the few minutes of writing is up, the speaker asks us to share with our table.

*What?! No no no no no... mine is dumb. Private. Stupid. Breathe, just breathe. Okay... here goes nothin'.*

I slide my paper to my neighbor. He's an older man. He smiles. His eyes scan my paper as he reads.

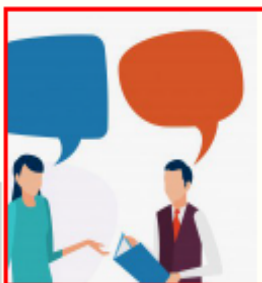
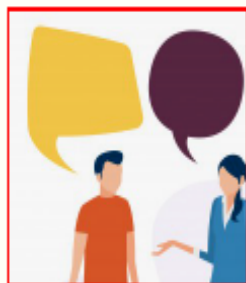
"I like your story," he looks at me. "It's better than what I have. Prompts are not so easy for me." He has an accent. I love accents. I'm curious where he's from.

*Wait, what? He likes my story?*

"You do?" I'm stunned. Thrilled! Really? My hope opens, just a crack. Maybe there will be a place for me here.

"Wow, thanks," I say.

He notices my surprise, I think, and introduces himself. "Hi..." he pauses, peering at my sticker. "... Jenny. Is this your first time at a CWC meeting? Welcome. I'm ilan."





## Home

Outside wind driven snow  
Plasters graceful pines  
Bending to each gust  
Chimney smoke curls up  
Giving warmth

Together we sip our coffee  
Watching the storms  
Of today, yesterday and tomorrow  
Insulated from frigid blasts  
By love

Cracks appear in the foundation  
Our home shakes but withstands  
As we find strength  
To enter the world outside  
Once again.

Patricia Avery



## Love's Resolutions

Yin and Yang  
Shadows and Sunlight

Winter and Summer  
Loss and Treasure  
Conflict and Resolution  
Tears and Laughter  
Discord and Harmony  
Boredom and Passion  
Confusion and Clarity  
Rainstorms and Rainbows  
Silence and Conversation

Separate hearts entwined  
And beating as one.

Lillian Rodich



Those who love deeply never  
grow old; they may die of old  
age, but they die young.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher  
1879–1958

## COME SIT WITH ME

Sitting at my kitchen table  
Enjoying the taste of sweet cinnamon bread  
Enjoying the aroma of freshly brewed coffee  
My window frames the tall tree in the garden  
Its Irish green leaves freshened by spring

Like the grace of a ballerina she sways  
To the will of the breeze urging her on  
Like the way I once moved to the Latin beat  
Of a Rumba ... a Tango ... a Cha Cha Cha  
Hips gyrating, reminding me of my own sensuality

Years escape rushing the days  
Every minute scurrying ... hurrying  
Just yesterday I sang a love song  
Just yesterday I danced along  
Just yesterday my mind was strong  
Just yesterday ... what went wrong

Slow down the rush ... Let me be here  
Loving this life like loving love  
Dance like the branches of my tree  
Taste my cinnamon bread smell the coffee  
And dream of my youth  
Come sit with me

Leslie Kaplan



As Tyler steps into the waiting area, her heart flutters. Signing in with the receptionist and settling into a chair, she surveys the room noting with approval the round bellies of the other patients, resting a hand lightly on her own growing bump. No one is obeying the 'No cell phones, PLEASE' proclaims a sign on the wall. There's a TV mounted high in the corner tuned to a banal morning talk show but every head looks down at a screen, updating a registry, ordering furniture, or keeping up with email.

*So sad,* thinks Tyler with an ache of genuine pity, *Too busy to enjoy this special time, too distracted to reflect on the miracle of life.*

A pregnant woman some years older than Tyler arrives and sits down in the chair beside her. Unlike the others, she does not reach for a phone. Instead, her eyes seem to cross and re-cross the room. One moment she is looking at the TV. The next she turns to the clock on the wall. For a long time it seems, she simply stares blankly into thin air. She's obviously at a loose end so Tyler decides to introduce herself.

The woman replies, "I'm Amy," and offers Tyler a handshake.

"Nice to meet you," they say to each other and then lapse into silence. After a minute has passed, Tyler finds a bottle of pale green hand sanitizer in her purse. Rubbing it over her fingers and palms, she offers some to Amy.

"Thanks," Amy says as Tyler cheerfully shares it out.

"You just can't be too careful, can you?" says Tyler, gesturing proudly to their tummies.

"I guess you can't," says Amy.

"How far along are you?" Tyler asks sweetly, putting away the hand sanitizer.

Amy lets out a sigh. "Thirty weeks," she says.

"Oooh," says Tyler admiringly, "I'm just twenty weeks." She pauses reverently to touch her belly. "It's been just wonderful," she says "I can't wait to be a mommy."

"Too bad, then," says Amy, the shadow of a smile on her lips.

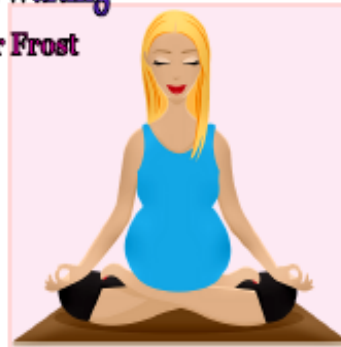
"What do you mean?" asks Tyler, her eyes suddenly troubled.

"You'll be waiting another twenty weeks at least, won't you?"

"Oh, yes," says Tyler, her face relaxing, "Well, I can wait that long." Amy nods and looks away.

## Mommies-In-Waiting

by Jennifer Frost



"Oh, I just can't wait to start decorating her room. I've got it all planned out," says Tyler, "pink and gray."

"Nice colors."

There's a pause, then Tyler asks, "Are you excited to be having a boy?"

"I like boys. I'd rather spend an afternoon at the laser-tag place than a mommy/daughter salon."

Tyler recoils though she tries to hide it. *What's wrong with a mommy/daughter salon,* she thinks irritably but says nothing. "Well," says Tyler, after a minute or two, "I just feel grateful to be taking part in this miracle."

"Yeah," says Amy.

"Don't you think so?" asks Tyler, sensing somehow that her feelings aren't shared, "Don't you feel the little baby growing inside you is a perfect miracle?"

"Maybe. But if it is, it must be the most common miracle on earth."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, isn't it?" says Amy, making a motion to the rest of the room, "Every woman here is having the same miracle. Practically every woman everywhere in the entire world. This is a miracle that occurs hundreds of thousands of times a day. Not counting animals. Even plants, if you really think about it. The whole planet is one constant miracle."

Tyler is aghast. *Where's your humility,* she thinks ruefully, *Where's your gratitude?* "But it is special," she protests, "Mine is special to me, anyway."

"Sure," says Amy, nodding and looking away, "Mine, too." Then she takes out her phone and busily starts to check her messages.

"Tyler Foster," calls a nurse from the inner door.

"That's me," says Tyler to Amy who barely looks up.

"See you later."

"See you later."

"Do you know if yours is a boy or a girl?" Tyler asks, filling the gap in the conversation.

"A boy," says Amy, "You?"

"I'm doing the ultrasound to find out today," Tyler replies with excitement, "I hope she's a girl."

"Girls are nice,."





## ARS GRATIA ARTIS

By Monte Swann

I grew up in Culver City and, when I was younger, I spent a lot of time sneaking into the backlots of Desilu and MGM studios.

On weekends, when studio security was most lax, my friends and I would go over the fences and enter a fanciful world few kids could imagine. We'd wander through the cobblestone streets of medieval Europe, or the small town of Mayberry, always keeping an eye out for the security guard. We could roam through the façade of an Arabian castle or board the Cotton Blossom, the old paddle wheeler from Showboat, permanently dry-docked on MGM Lake.

One weekend, while on a solo mission, I found myself being escorted off one of the backlots by an old security guard. "Next time I catch you in here," he threatened, through a grill of misaligned bridgework, "I'm gonna shoot you." That's what they always told us, but they never did. Dejected, I headed for home.

On the way I passed another small lot just across from the studio bordering the La Ballona creek. I'd passed this lot many times before but never considered exploring its grounds. There were no actual sets on it, just a few dilapidated buildings and some old studio equipment blistering in the California sunshine.

Determined to recapture the day, I squeezed through the gate and walked through the dry weeds towards one of the old houses. It was a simple wood frame farmhouse with a sagging roof, and a fenced corral area on one side. Not very fanciful.

I walked around the collapsed porch towards the back of the house where an old circus wagon rested in the shadow of an overgrown eucalyptus tree. Its gaily-painted scenes of circus life had faded long ago. I approached the cage and peered through the bars, squinting my eyes in the darkness. It smelled dirty inside, like a wet dog.

The bed was covered with matted straw and appeared empty except for a dark shape lying in one corner; a canvas tarp, I assumed, rolled up and moldering. I leaned into the cage, for a closer inspection and the old wagon shifted slightly, its rusted springs squeaking

in protest. The dark shape suddenly began to stir and the hair on my neck prickled to life. I couldn't believe what I was seeing!

It was a lion! He raised his head and stared at me with big yellow

eyes that seemed confused, as though awakened from a dream.

Sitting up, he shook his massive head, throwing off bits of straw and dust from his matted mane. His mouth stretched open in a wide yawn, his ragged teeth and pink tongue glistened in the darkness.

"Run!" I told myself, trembling like a scared Chihuahua. But I couldn't move. I was frozen in place, my hands fused to the metal bars in a death grip. The lion just sat there, stone faced, like a statue guarding the entrance to a library, toying with me, before springing forward to kill me. But he didn't. He just blinked his eyes then lowered his head and rolled onto his side as though he was expecting me to rub his stomach.

With my heart pounding out a thundering beat in my head, I backed away from the cage, never looking away from that dark shape breathing quietly in the cage. When I reached the corner of the farmhouse I ran as fast as I could.

It wasn't until I was over the fence and halfway home that I realized who that lion was. He was Leo, the once majestic mascot who roared at the beginning of every MGM film, still waiting here for his next close up.

That was over forty years ago and, although the memories are cloudy, most of the story is true. I had been on that lot and I had seen the cage, the location and layout of the lot confirmed by old city maps: It was part of the circus of MGM animals that once occupied the site in the 1940's.

But today, I realize how unlikely it is that Leo was really there. Was it my adolescent imagination or was it part of a dream that was slowly woven over time into reality? I'll never really be sure. A commercial building stands on the site where the lot used to be. The only witness to its famous past is the La Ballona creek silently flowing west towards the Pacific Ocean.



**On February 1, at 1-4 pm, join the members  
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**We meet in the Community Room of  
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