

The Happy Memories Club

Her writing group would meet each week, and each member was encouraged to share some writing with the others -- provided the subject matter was pleasant and meaningful

LEE SMITH DECEMBER 1995 ISSUE

I MAY be old, but I'm not dead.

Perhaps you are surprised to hear this. You may be surprised to learn that people like me are still capable of original ideas, intelligent insights, and intense feelings. Passionate love affairs, for example, are not uncommon here. Pacemakers cannot regulate the wild, unbridled yearnings of the heart. You do not wish to know this, I imagine. This knowledge is probably upsetting to you, as it is upsetting to my sons, who do not want to hear, for instance, about my relationship with Dr. Solomon Marx, the historian. "Please, Mom," my son Alex said, rolling his eyes. "Come on, Mama," my son Johnny said. "Can't you maintain a little dignity here?" *Dignity*, said Johnny, who runs a chain of miniature-golf courses! "I have had enough dignity to last me for the rest of my life, thank you," I told Johnny.

I've always done exactly what I was supposed to do--now I intend to do what I want.

"Besides, Dr. Solomon Marx is the joy of my life," I told them. This remained true even when my second surgery was less than successful, obliging me to take to this chair. It remained true until Solomon's most recent stroke, five weeks ago, which has paralyzed him below the waist and caused his thoughts to become disordered, so that he cannot always remember things, or the words for things. A survivor himself, Solomon is an expert on the Holocaust. He has numbers tattooed on his arm. He used to travel the world, speaking about the Holocaust. Now he can't remember what to call it.

"Well, I think it's a blessing," said one of the nurses--that young Miss Rogers. "The Holocaust was just awful."

"It is not a blessing, you ignorant bitch," I told her. "It is the end; our memories are all we've got." I put myself in reverse and sped off before she could reply. I could feel her staring at me as I motored down the hall. I am sure she wrote something in her ever-present notebook. "Inappropriate" and "unmanageable" are among the words they use, unpleasant and inaccurate adjectives all.

The words Solomon can't recall are always nouns.

"My dear," he said to me one day recently, when they had wheeled him out into the Residence Center lobby, "what did you say your name was?" He knew it, of course, deep in his heart's core, as well as he knew his own.

"Alice Scully," I said.

"Ah. Alice Scully," he said. "And what is it that we used to do together, Alice Scully, which brought me such intense--oh, so big--" His eyes were like bright little beads in his pinched face. "It was of the greatest, ah--"

"Sex," I told him. "You loved it."

He grinned at me. "Oh, yes," he said. "Sex. It was sex, indeed."

"Mrs. Scully!" his nurse snapped.

Now I have devised a little game to help Solomon remember nouns. It works like this. Whenever they bring him out, I go over to him and clasp my hands together as if I were hiding something in them. "If you can guess what I've got here," I say, "I'll give you a kiss."

He squints in concentration, fishing for nouns. If he gets one, I give him a kiss.

Some days are better than others.

This is true for us all, of course. We can't be expected to remember everything we know.

IN my life I was a teacher, and a good one. I taught English in the days when it was English, not "language arts." I taught for forty years at the Sandy Point School, in Sandy Point, Virginia, where I lived with my husband, Harold Scully, and raised four sons, three of them Harold's. Harold owned and ran the Trent Riverside

Pharmacy until the day he dropped dead in his drugstore counting out antibiotics for a Methodist preacher. His mouth and his eyes were wide open, as if whatever he found on the other side surprised him mightily.

I was sorry to see this, since Harold was not a man who liked surprises. I must say I gave him none. I was a good wife to Harold, though I was at first dismayed to learn that this role entailed taking care of his parents from the day of our marriage until their deaths. They both lived long lives, and his mother went blind at the end. But we lived in their house, the largest house in Sandy Point, right on the old tidal river, and their wealth enabled us to send our own sons off to the finest schools and even, in Robert's case, to medical school.



Harold's parents never got over Harold's failure to get into medical school himself. In fact, he barely made it through pharmacy school. As far as I know, however, he was a good pharmacist, never poisoning anybody or mixing up prescriptions. He loved to look at the orderly rows of bottles on his shelves. He loved labeling. Often he dispensed medical advice to his customers: which cough medicine worked best, what to put on a boil. People trusted him. Harold got a great deal of pleasure from his job and from his standing in the community.

I taught school at first because I was trained to do it and because I wanted to. I was never one to plan a menu or clip a recipe out of a magazine. I left all that to Harold's mother and to the family housekeeper, Lucille.

Anyway, I loved teaching. I loved to diagram sentences on the board, precisely separating the subject from the predicate with a vertical line, the linking verb from the predicate adjective with a slanted line, and so forth. The children used to try to stump me by making up long sentences they thought I couldn't diagram, sentences so complex that my final diagram on the board looked like a blueprint for a cathedral, with flying buttresses everywhere, all the lines connecting.

I loved geography, as well--tracing roads, tracing rivers. I loved to trace the route of the pony express, of the Underground Railroad, of De Soto's search for gold. I told them the story of that bumbling fool Zebulon Pike, who set out in 1805 to find the source of the Mississippi River and ended up a year later at the glorious peak they

named for him, Pike's Peak, which my sister, Rose, and I visited in 1926 on our cross-country odyssey with my brother John and his wife. In the photograph taken at Pike's Peak, I am seated astride a donkey, wearing a polka-dot dress and a floppy hat, while the western sky goes on and on endlessly behind me.

I taught my students these things: the first flight in a power-driven airplane was made by Wilbur and Orville Wright at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903; Wisconsin is the "Badger State"; the Dutch bought Manhattan Island from the Indians for twenty-four dollars in 1626; you can't sink in the Great Salt Lake. Now these facts ricochet in my head like pinballs, and I do not intend, thank you very much, to enter the Health Center for "better care."

I never tired of telling my students the story of the Mississippi River--how a scarlet oak leaf falling into Lake Itasca, in Minnesota, travels first north and then east through a wild, lonely landscape of lakes and rapids as if it were heading for Lake Superior, over the Falls of St. Anthony, down through Minneapolis and St. Paul, past bluffs and prairies and islands, to be joined by the Missouri River just above St. Louis, and then by the Ohio, where the water grows more than a mile wide--you can't see across it. My scarlet leaf meanders with eccentric loops and horseshoe curves down, down, down the great continent, through the delta, to New Orleans and beyond, past the great fertile mud plain shaped like a giant goose's foot, and into the Gulf of Mexico.

"And what happens to the leaf *then*, Mrs. Scully?" some student would never fail to ask.

"Ah," I would say, "then our little leaf becomes a part of the universe"--leaving them to ponder *that*!

I was known as a hard teacher but a fair one, and many of my students came back in later years to tell me how much they had learned.

HERE at Marshwood, a "total" retirement community, they want us to become children again, forgoing intelligence. This is why I was so pleased when the announcement went up on the bulletin board about a month ago:

WRITING GROUP TO MEET
WEDNESDAY, 3:00 P.M.

Ah, I thought, that promising infinitive "to meet." For, like many former English teachers, I had thought that someday I might like "to write."



At the appointed day and hour I motored over to the library (a euphemism, since the room contains mostly well-worn paperbacks by Jacqueline Susann and Louis L'Amour). I was dismayed to find Martha Louise Clapton already in charge. The idea had been hers, I learned; I should have known. She's the type who tries to run everything. Martha Louise Clapton has never liked me, having had her eye on Solomon, to no avail, for years before my arrival. She inclined her frizzy blue head ever so slightly to acknowledge my entrance.

"As I was just saying, Alice, several of us have discovered in mealtime conversation that in fact we've been writing for years, in our journals and letters and whatnot, and so I said to myself, 'Martha Louise, why not form a writing group?' and *voilà*."

"*Voilà*," I said, edging into the circle.

So it began.

BESIDES Martha Louise and myself, the writing group included Joy Richter, a minister's widow with a preference for poetry; Miss Elena Grier, who taught Shakespeare for years and years at a girls' preparatory school in Nashville, Tennessee; Frances Mason, whose husband lay in a coma over at the Health Center (another euphemism--you never leave the Health Center); Shirley Lassiter, who had buried three husbands and still thought of herself as a belle; and Sam Hofstetter, a retired lawyer, deaf as a post. We agreed to meet again in the library one week later. Each of us should bring some writing to share with the others.

"What's that?" Sam Hofstetter said. We wrote the time and place down on a little piece of paper and gave it to him. He folded the paper carefully, placing it in his pocket. "Could you make copies of the writing, please?" he asked. He inclined his silver head and tapped his ear significantly. We all agreed. Of course we agreed--we outnumber the men four to one, poor old things. In a place like this they get more attention than you would believe.

Then Joy Richter said that she probably couldn't afford to make copies. She said she was on a limited budget.

I said I felt sure we could use the Xerox machine in the manager's office, especially since we needed it for the writing group.

"Oh, I don't know." Frances Mason started wringing her hands. "They might not let us."

"I'll take care of it," Martha Louise said majestically. "Thank you, Alice, for your suggestion. Thank you, everyone, for joining the group."

I HAD wondered if I might suffer initially from writer's block, but nothing of that sort occurred. In fact I was flooded by memories--overwhelmed, engulfed, as I sat in my chair by the picture window, writing on my lap board. I was not even aware of the world outside, my head was so full of the people and places of the past, rising up in my mind as they were then, in all the fullness of life, and myself as I was then, that headstrong girl longing to leave her home in east Virginia and walk in the world at large.

I wrote and wrote. I wrote for three days. I wrote until I felt satisfied, and then I stopped. I felt better than I had in years, full of new life and freedom (a paradox, since I am more and more confined to this chair).

During that week Solomon guessed "candy," "ring," and "Anacin." He was getting better. I was not. I ignored certain symptoms in order to attend the Wednesday meeting of the writing group.

Martha Louise led off. Her blue eyes looked huge, like lakes, behind her glasses. "They just don't make families like they used to," she began, and continued with an account of growing up on a farm in Ohio, how her parents struggled to make ends meet, how the children strung popcorn and cut out paper ornaments to trim the tree when they had no money for Christmas, how they pulled taffy and laid it out on a marble slab, and how each older child had a little one to take care of. "We were poor but we were happy," Martha Louise concluded. "It was an ideal childhood."

"Oh, Martha Louise," Frances Mason said tremulously, "that was just beautiful."

Everyone agreed.

Too many adjectives, I thought, but I held my tongue.

Next Joy Richter read a poem about seeing God in everything: "the stuff of day" was a phrase I rather liked. Joy Richter apparently saw God in a shiny red apple, in a dewy rose, in her husband's kind blue eyes, in photographs of her grandchildren. The poem was pretty good, but it would have been better if she hadn't tried so hard to rhyme it.

Miss Elena then presented a sonnet comparing life to a merry-go-round. The final couplet went

Lost children, though you're old, remember well
The joy and music of life's carousel.

This was not bad, and I said so. Frances Mason read a reminiscence about her husband's return from the Second World War, which featured the young Frances "hovering upon the future" in a porch swing as she "listened for the tread of his beloved boot." The military theme was continued by Sam Hofstetter, who read (loudly) an account of Army life titled "Somewhere in France." Shirley Lassiter was the only one whose story was not about herself. Instead it was fiction evidently modeled on a romance novel, for it involved a voluptuous debutante who had to choose between two men. Both of them were rich, and both of them loved her, but one had a fatal disease, and for some reason this young woman didn't know which one.

"Why not?" boomed the literal Sam.

"It's a mystery, silly," Shirley Lassiter said. "That's the plot." Shirley Lassiter had a way of resting her jeweled hands on her enormous bosom as if it were a shelf. "I don't want to give the plot away," she said. Clearly, she did not have a brain in her head.

Then came my turn.

I began to read the story of my childhood. I had grown up in the tiny coastal town of Waterville, Maryland. I was the fourth child in a family of five, with three older

brothers and a baby sister. My father, who was in the oyster business, killed himself when I was six and Rose was only three. He went out into the Chesapeake Bay in an old rowboat, chopped a hole in the bottom of it with an ax, and then shot himself in the head with a revolver. He meant to finish the job. He did not sink as planned, however, because a fisherman witnessed the act, and hauled his body to shore.

This left Mama with five children to raise and no means of support. She was forced to turn our home into a boardinghouse, keeping mostly teachers from Goucher College and salesmen passing through, although two old widows, Mrs. Flora Lewis and Mrs. Virginia Prince, stayed with us for years. Miss Flora, as we called her, had to have a cup of warm milk every night at bedtime; I will never forget it. It could be neither too hot nor too cold. I was the one who took it up to her, stepping so carefully up the dark back stair.

Nor will I forget young Miss Day from Richmond, a teacher, who played the piano beautifully. She used to play "Clair de Lune" and "Für Elise" on the old upright in the parlor. I would already have been sent to bed, and so I'd lie there trembling in the dark, seized by feelings I couldn't name, as the notes floated up to me and Rose in our little room, in our white iron bed wrought with roses and figures of nymphs. Miss Day was jilted some years later, we heard, her virtue lost and her reputation ruined.

Every Sunday, Mama presided over the big tureen at breakfast, when we'd have boiled fish and crisp little johnnycakes. To this day I have never tasted anything as good as those johnnycakes. Mama's face was flushed, and her hair escaped its bun to curl in damp tendrils as she dished up the breakfast plates. I thought she was beautiful. I'm sure she could have married again had she chosen to do so, but her heart was full of bitterness at the way her life had turned out, and she never forgave our father, or looked at another man.

Daddy had been a charmer, by all accounts. He carried a silver-handled cane and allowed me to play with his gold pocket watch when I was especially good. He took me to harness races, where we cheered for a horse he owned, a big roan named Joe Cord. On these excursions I wore a white dress and stockings and patent-leather shoes. And how Daddy could sing! He had a lovely baritone voice. I remember him on bended knee singing "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do" to Mama, who

pretended to be embarrassed but was not. I remember his bouncing Rose up and down on his lap and singing, "This is the way the lady rides."

After his death the boys went off to sea as soon as they could, and I was obliged to work in the kitchen and take care of Rose. Kitchen work in a boardinghouse is never finished. This is why I have never liked to cook since, though I know how to do it, I can assure you.

We had a summer kitchen outside, so that it wouldn't heat up the whole house when we were cooking or canning. It had a kerosene stove. I remember one time when we were putting up blackberry jam, and one of those jars simply blew up. We had blackberry jam all over the place. Glass cut the Negro girl, Ocie, who was helping out, and I was surprised to see that her blood was as red as mine.

As time went on, Mama grew sadder and withdrew from us, sometimes barely speaking for days on end. My great joy was Rose, a lively child with golden curls and skin so fair you could see the blue veins beneath it. I slept with Rose every night and played with her every day. Since Mama was indisposed, we could do whatever we wanted, and we had the run of the town, just like boys. We'd go clamming in the bay with an inner tube floating out behind us, tied to my waist by a rope. We'd feel the clams with our feet and rake them up, flipping them into a net attached to the inner tube. Once, we went on a sailing trip with a cousin of ours, Bud Ned Black, up the Chickahominy River for a load of brick. But the wind failed and we got stuck there. We just *sat* on that river, for what seemed like days and days. Rose fussed and fumed while Cap'n Bud Ned drank whiskey and chewed tobacco and did not appear to mind the situation, so long as his supplies held out. But Rose was impatient--always, always so impatient.

"Alice," she said dramatically, as we sat staring out at the shining water, the green trees at its edge, the wheeling gulls, "I will *die* if we don't move. I will die here," Rose said, though Bud Ned and I laughed at her.

But Rose meant it. As she grew older, she had to go here, go there, do this, do that, have this, have that--she hated being poor and living in the boardinghouse, and could not wait to grow up and go away.

We both developed a serious taste for distance when our brother John and his wife took us motoring across the country. I was sixteen. I loved that trip, from the first

stage of planning our route on the map to finally viewing the great mountains, which sprang straight up from the desert like apparitions. Of course, we had never seen such mountains; they took my breath away. I remember how Rose flung her arms out wide to the world as we stood in the cold wind on Pike's Peak. I believe we could have gone on driving and driving forever. But we had to return, and I had to resume my duties, letting go the girl John had hired so that Mama would permit my absence. John was our sweetest brother, but they are all dead now, all my brothers, and Rose, too.

I have outlived everyone.

Only yesterday Rose and I were little girls, playing a game we loved so well, a game that strikes me now as terribly dangerous. This memory is more vivid than any other in my life.

It is late night, summertime. Rose and I have sneaked out of the boardinghouse, down the tiny back stair past the gently sighing widows' rooms; past Mama's room, door open, moonlight ghostly on the mosquito netting draped from the canopy over her bed; past the snoring salesman's rooms, stepping tiptoe across the wide-plank kitchen floor, wincing at each squeak; and out the kitchen door into moonlight so bright that it leaves shadows. Darting from tree to tree, we cross the yard and attain the sidewalk, moving rapidly past the big sleeping houses with their shutters yawning open to the cool night air, down the sidewalk to the edge of town where the sidewalk ends and the road goes on forever through miles and miles of peanut fields and other towns and other fields, toward Baltimore.

Rose and I lie down flat in the middle of the road, which still retains the heat of the day, and let it warm us head to toe as we dream aloud of what the future holds. At different times Rose planned to be an aviator, a doctor, and a film actress living in California, with an orange tree in her yard. Even her most domestic dreams were grand. "I'll have a big house and lots of servants and a husband who loves me *so much*," Rose would say, "and a yellow convertible touring car, and six children, and we will be rich and they will never have to work, and I will put a silk scarf on my head and we will all go out riding on Sunday."

Even then I said I would be a teacher, because I was always good in school, but I would be a missionary teacher, enlightening natives in some far-off corner of the

world. Even as I said it, though, I believe I knew it would not come to pass, for I was bound to stay at home, as Rose was bound to go.

But we'd lie there looking up at the sky, and dream our dreams, and wait for the thrill of an oncoming vehicle, which we could hear coming a long time away, and could feel throughout the length of our bodies as it neared us. We would roll off the pavement and into the peanut field just as the car approached, our hearts pounding. Sometimes we nearly dozed on that warm road--and once we were almost killed by a potato truck.

Gradually, as Mama retreated to her room, I took over the running of the boardinghouse, and Mama's care as well. At eighteen Rose ran away with a fast-talking furniture salesman who had been boarding with us. They settled finally in Ohio, and had three children, and her life was not glamorous in the least, though better than some, and we wrote to each other every week until her death, of ovarian cancer, at thirty-nine.

This was as far as I'd gotten.

I quit reading aloud and looked around the room. Joy Richter was ashen, Miss Elena Grier was mumbling to herself, and Shirley Lassiter was breathing heavily and fluttering her fingers at her throat. Sam Hofstetter stared fixedly at me with the oddest expression on his face, and Frances Mason wept openly, shaking with sobs.

"Alice! Now just look at what you've done!" Martha Louise said to me severely.
"Meeting adjourned!"

I HAD to miss the third meeting of the writing group, because Dr. Culbertson sent me to the Health Center for treatment and further tests (euphemisms both). Dr. Culbertson then went so far as to consult with my son Robert, also a doctor, about what to do with me next. Dr. Culbertson believed that I ought to move to the Health Center, for "better care." Of course I called Robert immediately and gave him a piece of my mind.

That was yesterday.

I know they are discussing me by telephone--Robert, Alex, Johnny, and Carl. Lines are buzzing up and down the East Coast.

I came here when I had to, because I did not want any of their wives to get stuck with me, as I had gotten stuck with Harold's mother and father. Now I expect some common decency and respect. At times like this I wish for daughters, who often, I feel, have more compassion and understanding than sons.

Even Carl, the child of my heart, says I had "better listen to the doctor."

Instead I have been listening to this voice too long silent inside me, the voice of myself, as I write page after page propped up in bed in the Health Center.

Today is Wednesday. I have skipped certain of my afternoon medications. At 2:15 I buzz for Sheila, my favorite, a tall young nurse's aide with the grace of a gazelle. "Sheila," I say, "I need for you to help me dress, dear, and then roll my chair over here, if you will. My own chair, I mean. I have to go to a meeting."

Sheila looks at my chart and then back at me, her eyes wide. "It doesn't say . . ." she begins.

"Dr. Culbertson said it would be perfectly all right," I assure her. I pull a \$20.00 bill from my purse, which I keep right beside me in bed, and hand it to her. "I know it's a lot of trouble, but it's very important," I say. "I think I'll just slip on the red sweater and the black wraparound skirt--that's so easy to get on. They're both in the drawer, dear."

"Okay, honey," Sheila says, and she gets me dressed and sets me in my chair. I put on lipstick and have Sheila fluff up my hair in the back where it's gotten so flat from lying in bed. Sheila hands me my purse and my notebook, and then I'm off, waving to the girls at the nurses' station as I purr past them. They wave back. I feel fine now. I take the elevator down to the first floor and then motor through the lobby, speaking to acquaintances. I pass the gift shop, the newspaper stand, and all the waiting rooms.

It's chilly outside. I head up the walkway past the par-three golf course, where I spy Parker Howard, ludicrous in those bright-green pants they sell to old men, putting on the third hole. "Hi, Parker!" I cry.

"Hello, Alice," he calls. "Nice to see you out!" He sinks the putt.

I enter the Multipurpose Building and head for the library, where the writers' group is already in progress. Driving over from the Health Center took longer than I'd

expected.

Miss Elena is reading, but she stops and looks up when I come in, her mouth a perfect O. Everybody looks at Martha Louise.

"Why, Alice," Martha Louise says. She clears her throat. "We didn't expect that you would be joining us today. We heard that you were in the Health Center."

"I was," I say. "But I'm out now."

"Evidently," Martha Louise says.

I ride up to the circular table, set my brake, get out my notebook, and ask Miss Elena for a copy of whatever she's reading. Wordless, she slides one over. But she still does not resume. They're all looking at me.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Well, Alice, last week, when you were absent, we laid out some ground rules for this writing group." Martha Louise gains composure as she goes along. "We are all in agreement here, Alice, that if this is to be a pleasant and meaningful club for all of us, we need to restrict our subject matter to what everyone enjoys."

"So?" I don't get it.

"We've also adopted an official name for the group." Now Martha Louise is as cheerful as a robin.

"What is it?"

"It's the Happy Memories Club," she announces, and they all nod.

I am beginning to get it.

"You mean to tell me--" I start.

"I mean to tell you that if you wish to be a part of this group, Alice Scully, you will have to calm yourself down, and keep your subject matter in check. We don't come here to be upset," Martha Louise says serenely.

They are all watching me closely now, Sam Hofstetter in particular. I think they expect an outburst.

But I won't give them the satisfaction.

"Fine," I say. This is a lie. "That sounds just fine to me. Good idea!" I smile at everybody.

There is a perceptible relaxation then, an audible settling back into chairs, as Miss Elena resumes her reading. It's a travelogue named "Shakespeare and His Haunts," about a tour she made to England several years ago. But I find myself unable to listen. I simply can't hear Elena, or Joy, who reads next, or even Sam.

"Well, is that it for today? Anybody else?" Martha Louise raps her knuckles against the table.

"I brought something," I say, "but I don't have copies."

I look at Sam, who shrugs and smiles and says I should go ahead anyway. Everybody else looks at Martha Louise.

"Well, go on, then," she directs tartly, and I begin.

After Rose's disappearance, my mother took to her bed and turned her face to the wall, leaving me in charge of everything. Oh, how I worked! I worked like a dog, long hours, a cruelly unnatural life for a spirited young woman. Yet I persevered. People in the town, including our minister, complimented me; I was discussed and admired. Our boardinghouse stayed full, and somehow I managed, with Ocie's help, to get the meals on the table. I smiled and chattered at mealtime. Yet inside I was starving, starving for love and life.

Thus it was not surprising, I suppose, that I should fall for the first man who showed any interest in me. He was a schoolteacher who had been educated at the university, in Charlottesville, a thin, dreamy young man from one of the finest families in Virginia. His grandfather had been the governor. He used to sit out by the sound every evening after supper, reading, and one day I joined him there. It was a lovely June evening; the sound was full of sailboats, and the sky above us was as round and blue as a bowl.

"I was reading a poem about a girl with beautiful yellow hair," he said, "and then I look up and what do I see? A real girl with beautiful yellow hair."

For some reason I started to cry, not even caring what my other boarders thought as they sat up on the porch looking out over this landscape in which we figured.

"Come here," he said, and he took my hand and led me behind the old rose-covered boathouse, where he pulled me to him and kissed me curiously, as if it were an experiment.

His name was Carl Redding Armistead III. He had the reedy look of a poet, but all the assurance of the privileged class. I was older than he, but he was more experienced. He was well educated, and had been to Europe several times.

"You pretty thing," he said, and kissed me again. The scent of the roses was everywhere.

I went that night to his room, and before the summer was out, we had lain together in nearly every room of the boardinghouse. We were crazy for each other by then, and I didn't care what might happen, or who knew. On Saturday evenings I'd leave a cold supper for the rest, and Carl and I would take the skiff and row out to Sand Island, where the wild ponies were, and take off all our clothes and make love. Sometimes my back would be red and bleeding from the rough black sand and the broken shells on the beach.

"Just a minute! Just a minute here!" Martha Louise is pounding on the table, and Frances Mason is crying, as usual. Sam Hofstetter is staring at me in a manner that indicates that he has heard every word I've said.

"Well, I think that's terrific!" Shirley Lassiter giggles and bats her painted blue eyelids at us all.

Of course this romance did not last. Nothing that intense can be sustained, though the loss of such intensity can scarcely be borne. Quite simply, Carl and I foundered upon the prospect of the future. He had to go on to the world that awaited him; I could not leave Mama. Our final parting was bitter--we were spent, exhausted by the force of what had passed between us. He did not even look back as he sped away in his little red sports car, nor did I cry.

Nor did I ever tell him about the existence of Carl, my son, whom I bore defiantly out of wedlock nine months later, telling no one who the father was. Oh, those were hard, black days! I was ostracized by the very people who had formerly

praised me, and ogled by the men in my boardinghouse, who now considered me a fallen woman. I wore myself to a frazzle taking care of Mama and the baby at the same time.

One night, I remember, I was so tired that I felt that I would actually die, yet little Carl would not stop crying. Nothing would quiet him--not rocking, not the breast, not walking the room. He had an oddly unpleasant cry, like a cat mewling. I remember looking out my window at the quiet town where everyone slept--everyone on this earth, I felt, except me. I held Carl out at arm's length and looked hard at him in the streetlight, at his red, twisted little face. I had an awful urge to throw him out the window--

"That's enough!" several of them say at once. Martha Louise is standing.

But it is Miss Elena who speaks. "I cannot believe," she says severely, "that out of your entire life, Alice Scully, this is all you can find to write about. What of your long marriage to Mr. Scully? Your seven grandchildren? Those of us who have not been blessed with grandchildren would give--"

Of course I loved Harold Scully. Of course I love my grandchildren. I love Solomon, too. I love them all. Miss Elena is like my sons, too terrified to admit to herself how many people we can love, how various we are. She does not want to hear it any more than they do, any more than you do. You all want us to *never change, never change*.

I did not throw my baby out the window after all, and my mother finally died, and I sold the boardinghouse then and was able, at last, to go to school.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Dr. Culbertson appear at the library door, accompanied by a man I do not know. Martha Louise says, "I simply cannot believe that a former *English teacher*--"

This strikes me as very funny. My mind is filled with enormous sentences as I back up my chair and then start forward, out the other door and down the hall and outside into the sweet spring day, where the sunshine falls on my face as it did in those days on the beach, my whole body hot and aching and sticky with sweat and salt and blood, the wild ponies paying us no mind as they ate the tall grass that grew at the edge of the dunes. Sometimes the ponies came so close that we could

reach out and touch them. Their coats were shaggy and rough and full of burrs, I remember.

Oh, I remember everything as I cruise forward on the sidewalk that neatly separates the rock garden from the golf course. I turn right at the corner, instead of left toward the Health Center. "Fore!" Parker Howard shouts, waving at me. *A former English teacher*, Martha Louise said. These sidewalks are like diagrams, parallel lines and dividers: oh, I could diagram anything. The semicolon, I used to say, is like a little scale; it must have items of equal rank, I'd warn them. Do not use a semicolon between a clause and a phrase, or a main clause and a subordinate clause. Do not write *I loved Carl Redding Armistead; a rich man's son*. Do not write *If I had really loved Carl Armistead; I would have left with him despite all obstacles*. Do not write *I still feel his touch; which has thrilled me throughout my life*.

I turn at the top of the hill and motor along the sidewalk toward the Residence Center, hoping to see Solomon. The sun is in my eyes. Do not carelessly link two sentences with a comma. Do not write *I want to see Solomon again, he has meant so much to me*. To correct this problem, subordinate one of the parts. *I want to see Solomon, because he has meant so much to me*. Because he has meant. So much. To me. Fragments. Fragments all. I push the button to open the door into the Residence Center, and sure enough, they've brought him out. They've dressed him in his Madras plaid shirt and wheeled him in front of the television, which he hates. I cruise right over.

"Solomon," I say, but at first he doesn't respond when he looks at me. I come even closer. "Solomon!" I say sharply, bumping his wheelchair. He notices me then, and a little light comes into his eyes.

I cup my hands. "Solomon," I say, "I'll give you a kiss if you can guess what I've got in my hands."

He looks at me for a while longer.

"Now, Mrs. Scully," his nurse starts.

"Come on," I say. "What have I got in here?"

"An elephant," Solomon finally says.

"Close enough!" I cry, and lean right over to kiss his sweet old cheek, being unable to reach his mouth.

"Mrs. Scully," his nurse starts again, but I'm gone, I'm history, I'm out the front door and around the parking circle and up the long entrance drive to the highway. It all connects. Everything connects. The sun is bright, the dogwoods are blooming, the state flower of Virginia is the dogwood, I can still see the sun on the Chickahominy River and my own little sons as they sail their own little boats in a tidal pool by the Chesapeake Bay, they were all blond boys once, though their hair would darken later, Annapolis is the capital of Maryland, the first historic words ever transmitted by telegraph came to Maryland: "What hath God wrought?" The sun is still shining. It glares off the snow on Pike's Peak, it gleams through the milky blue glass of the old apothecary jar in the window of Harold Scully's shop, it warms the asphalt on that road where Rose and I lie waiting, waiting, waiting.

Illustration by Alan E. Cober

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