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# Susie's Garden

The Story of Our Love Affair



by

Michael W. Masters

In remembrance of my beloved wife  
Susan Lee Masters (née Turner)

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# *Susie's Garden*



*She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes. . .*

“She Walks in Beauty”  
— George Gordon Lord Byron

# *Susie's Garden*

*The Story of Our Love Affair*



*Michael W. Masters*

IngramSpark



*Susan Lee Masters (née Turner), August 1970  
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# Dedication

*For Susan, my guiding star—  
When she said yes, my life began*



*Search by Night*

*Beneath the Moon, a darkling land,  
Bathed in silvery light,  
Waits for the kiss of a falling star  
To end the lonely night.*

*Soft and new on the night wind's breath —  
How cool it feels upon a tear —  
Soundless words drift on its wings,  
That only the Moon can hear.*

*The land grows dim, the silver fades,  
Lost in a lifeless dawn —  
Come quickly now while night remains,  
Before the magic is gone.*

— Michael, 1966



*“Dearest one, when I get there, I will find you and we’ll never be  
apart again.”*

Susie's Garden  
The Story of Our Love Affair

Michael W. Masters

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by IngramSpark

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# Susie's Garden



*One man, one wife,  
One love, through life,  
Memories are made of this.*  
— “Memories Are Made of This”

Written by Terry Gilkyson, Richard Dehr & Frank Miller  
Recorded by Dean Martin

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# Preface

*Grief is the price we pay for love*  
— Queen Elizabeth II

*Her absence is like the sky,  
Spread over everything.*  
— C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

*“Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom. . .”*  
— Sonnet 116 “Let me not to the marriage of true minds”  
William Shakespeare

In the early morning hours of Friday, August 8, 2025, my beloved wife of 55 wonderful years, Susan Lee Masters, born Susan Lee Turner, passed away just weeks short of her 78<sup>th</sup> birthday and our 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary—a black Friday I cannot forget. Our daughter and I, who were with her at the time, were devastated. Susan had been ill and in decline for a long time but the shock of the dreaded event was almost impossible to endure.

I was myself soon afterward taken ill. Having put life on hold for months while trying to save her—an effort that in retrospect the doctors, nurses, and even our daughter knew to be impossible from the beginning—I had gone without proper food, sleep and exercise. Conditions I should have attended to long before finally caught up and I followed her into the hospital. It has been a slow climb back to physical health but not wellbeing by other measures—a goal that seems forever out of reach. I don't regret one iota of the effort or the

after-effect, only that the effort wasn't successful—I would have gladly given up all to save her.

In trying to deal with the aftermath—grief over the loss of a woman whose love and companionship bridged a void of loneliness in my own life—I realized that for my peace of mind I must never allow her memory to fade. People say that over time grief subsides and one can live a normal life again. Perhaps I'm wired differently, but the thought of forgetting her is as intolerable as her passing. A study by Danish scientists found evidence that people really can die of a broken heart. I believe it.

Over the years, I have made a myriad of family photographs—of her, of our children, of relatives and of places we went and things we did and sights we saw. It occurred to me that the best thing I could do to preserve her memory and honor her life would be to write down in biographical form a description of the life we led, the events that shaped us and the joys and travails we experienced, illustrated with those cherished photographs. As such, it will seem mundane to some, but it fulfills my goal, to record faithfully the events of our lives so that her true memory lives on.

My intent was not just to record our lives but also to help anyone who reads the text and views her photographs to understand the essential Susan—a unique woman who was at once beautiful, intelligent, original, accomplished, competent, outspoken, a leader, uncomplaining, outgoing and yet reserved and self-reliant, loving of her family, and above all else, delightfully mischievous when it came to teasing her devoted and rather serious-minded husband.

I realized that whatever I wrote would necessarily be deeply introspective and intensely personal. There is an unresolved need to better understand her—more so even than while she was still with us—a need to understand not just the woman, and not just what happened but also why. What caused her health to decline to crisis levels? Was there something more than just natural poor health and illness? Did life style and personal choices play a role? Were there personality altering events in her life before I met her that she was reluctant to reveal? Could I have done anything differently that would had led to a different outcome? These were questions I had to

have answers to.

Finding those answers turned into something of a cold case search, albeit one offering only speculation, without definitive answers.

I also knew that close relatives and intimate friends might be the only ones to ever read these pages. Nevertheless, for me it had to be done and the thought became the action—driven by an irresistible urge to speak of her, to remember her, to honor her, to render her life comprehensible. The text and photographs that follow constitute that record.

Above all else, it is the story of our love affair.

If others come across this very personal story and are led to reexamine their own relationships and their own choices in life in a positive way, then it will have been doubly worth the effort.

In conclusion, I can only add that no man ever loved a woman more than I loved Susan—still love Susan—and I struggle daily to find the will to continue, persisting if for no other reason than as a tribute to the incomparable woman she was.

— April 2026

*Author's note: The title, Susie's Garden, commemorates Susan's lifetime love of flowers and gardening. Working in her garden provided Susan with endless hours of happiness in her prime years, it sustained her in her declining years and it was the last thing she gazed at, longingly, on her final trip home.*



## Prologue



*When you think there's no bright tomorrow  
And you feel you can't try again  
Suddenly there's a valley  
Where hope and love begin.*  
— "Suddenly There's a Valley"

Written by Chuck Meyer & Biff Jones  
Recorded by Gogi Grant



first laid eyes on Susan as she was checking in with our secretary at the military base where I worked, in a World War II era whitewashed building across the street from our test site. As I subsequently learned, she was fresh out of college having finished her course work for a degree in Mathematics a semester early,



*Susan's mischievous eyes*

## Susie's Garden

and she came in as a temporary employee under our intern program pending conversion to permanent professional status once she received her degree.

What I saw was a very attractive, indeed quietly beautiful petite young woman with dark brown hair and lovely innocent, inquiring blue eyes, intelligent eyes with just a hint of a mischievous spirit, enigmatic eyes that saw and understood far more than she was willing to reveal to casual acquaintances.

In later years I would say of her that as a young woman she was unaffectedly beautiful, not movie star flashy or self-absorbed but rather girl next door beautiful, with the kind of quiet unpretentious allure that made one want to scoop her up and carry her home to



*“Her face, features and form were exquisite”*

mama. She carried herself with a serene poise that spoke of inner strength and assurance, an aura she radiated as naturally as the sun radiates heat and light.

Her face, features and form were exquisite, full of radiant youthful health, and she had a naturally buoyant smile that lit up her face and indeed the whole room whenever she spoke. It subsumed her entire persona, her intense blue eyes positively sparkling with life and vitality. All of this made her incredibly photogenic and as I got to know her, I delighted in posing her for informal portraits or capturing her in casual moments, recording slices of our shared life.

Now, more than ever, I'm grateful that I did, for the photographs of her that I've collected over the years preserve and illuminate many of my most precious memories of her and of our life together. They are all the more to be cherished because they keep her memory alive, and I return to them every single day, tinged now with sadness but grateful to have journeyed together with her for 55 happy,

## Susie's Garden

adventurous, and gratifying years. She is always there, just below conscious thought, and she is missed every day—sometimes to a degree that is almost unbearable.



*Young, vibrant, beautiful, lively, intelligent—the special woman who was, and is the love of my life — thank you Lord for the loan of this gorgeous, incomparable creature for 55 glorious years*

# Susie's Garden

*Part I — Love and  
Marriage*



# Susie's Garden

## How We Met



*You just need twenty seconds  
Of insane courage.*

— Matt Damon on what it took for him to approach  
the beautiful woman who became his wife.  
From “We Bought a Zoo”



I had always been shy with women, especially pretty women, and the more I was attracted to them the more difficult it was to introduce myself and talk to them. Psychologists say it is not an uncommon problem for young men, and I had it worse than most. But this was different—I don't know if it was love at first sight (if it wasn't, it would arrive soon thereafter with the impact of a sledge hammer) or just instinctive attraction in response to the



*Could that be a come-hither look?*

## Susie's Garden

magnetic youthful bloom of the young woman sitting with our secretary, but whatever it was, there was an instant compulsion the moment I saw her to know her, to be with her, to have her want to be with me, that completely overrode my ingrained shyness. It was as if I was possessed. I knew that I had to meet her, and to meet her I had to find out her name and phone number—and there was only one way to get it.

Without hesitation I did something that would get me excommunicated today—after this lovely mirage departed for her new work assignment I asked our secretary for it. She smiled indulgently, told me that her name was Susan and added her phone number. I called Susan that night and arranged our first date, for the next night after work.

At the time she was living with her grandparents out in then undeveloped rural county farmland. I followed her directions, and after many back road twists and turns I eventually found a long gravel driveway that led past farm fields to the back of her grandparents' house, at the edge of a deep wood. A pond shimmered off to one side.



*Mutual admiration society*

I knocked on the back door and she came out to greet me. I didn't meet her grandparents that time, but later we would spend many happy hours there. We set out for town, having agreed to a first chat over hot fudge sundaes at the town's long since shuttered Hot Shoppe, a local hang-out at the time.

I don't remember much of what we talked about on that first date but she was perfectly capable of carrying the conversation herself with a minimum of prompts from me. She could be a gay, high-spirited take-charge extrovert in a crowd and with friends or completely self-sufficient when alone—the latter a telltale sign that she was far more complex than she first appeared.

When we discussed things we each liked to do, she mentioned,

improbably, that she liked to read the inscriptions on grave markers in cemeteries. The unexpected oddness of the idea inspired immediate visions of opportunity, and I suggested helpfully that maybe we could visit one that very night. After all, I thought to myself, it's getting dark, and. . . Perhaps she could read minds, for she instantly squashed the idea, apparently not a new experience for her—see following paragraph about dating marines.

The imagined first kiss happened later, at a time when it meant something special to both of us.

Early on I learned that while in college she had dated many marine officers from a nearby base. Had I known that going in I might have been reluctant to even make a start. After all, it's difficult to compete with the panache of a uniform—especially one worn by a marine. (Her best friend in college married a marine fighter pilot so there was precedent. . .)

Thankfully, by the time she told me about those dates we were well under way and nothing could have torn me away from her.

She confided that when an officer she might be dating (a staple for young ladies at her all-girls college) would lay an exploratory hand on her knee as a prelude to hoped-for better things she would disdainfully take the hand between thumb and forefinger, as if were a foul, reeking bit of refuse, remove it and drop it on the seat between them and then inform the offender in a contemptuous voice dripping with scorn, "Men amuse me." Brrr! Thank God I was never doused in that ice bath—I don't know how one manages to thaw out.



*Bride: happy smile;  
Groom: Where's the  
getaway car?*

## Susie's Garden

I did make one egregious mistake on our way to our hot fudge sundaes. As an unmarried young male, it was instinctive to notice every passing young lady. On this occasion, as we were riding through town I happened to unthinkingly glance—briefly I thought, but overly long one suspects given who I was with and why—at a pair of coeds on the sidewalk. She immediately noticed—nothing ever escaped her—and commented light-heartedly but pointedly on the unwisdom of that glance.



*Happy daughter, proud mother*

She never forgot, that or any other of many transgressions—it must be a female genetic trait. Forever after, she delighted in revealing the worst of that and other lapses to family and friends, always in a *faux*-injured "do-you-know-what-he-did?" voice, but with that mischievous gleam twinkling in her eyes.

Notwithstanding this embarrassing breach of dating etiquette, the encounter seemed otherwise to have gone well and I asked if I could see her again. I don't know what she thought of me at that early juncture, but I must have earned at least a conditional passing mark for she said yes. I cannot imagine what I would have done had she said no—I was already beguiled by those intense, playful blue eyes,

## Susie's Garden

enthralled by her quirky personality and quicksilver smile, intoxicated by the nearness of her all too real female presence.

Within a week, I asked her if I could see her every day and once again, she said yes. In fact, for everything I ever asked of her, the answer was always yes. Within a month we were engaged. Four months later we were married.

# Susie's Garden

## Summer of Love



*Love is the only gold*  
— Alfred Lord Tennyson

*Doubt thou the stars are fire,  
Doubt that the sun doth move,  
Doubt truth to be a liar,  
But never doubt I love.*  
— “Hamlet” Act 2, Scene 2  
William Shakespeare

S hat summer between spring engagement and August wedding was idyllic. We spent every available moment together, getting to know and love one another at an ever-deepening level. Much of our together time was at her grandparents' house, hanging out, swimming in their pond, washing my (our) car, and posing her for endless photographs.

Her grandmother, Mema to everyone, was the center her family, consisting of Susan's mother and her two brothers, both of the latter living locally with their children. Mema thus had grandchildren aplenty and her house was always overrun by laughing, playing, squealing young people. She made the most delicious Sunday fried chicken dinners, meals that drew a full table every time. Susan's grandfather, a gruff old curmudgeon who spoke mostly in grunts,

spent days in his recliner in their den in front of his television, largely ignored by the young folk. He barely acknowledged me, treatment I suspect he meted out to other suitors who had preceded me—of which there were many, as I discovered over time.

I didn't give a second thought to her grandfather. For the first time in my life, I was truly happy—no longer alone and lonely.

After the engagement was announced, her mother, Joyce, came from out-of-state to plan the wedding with Susan—and, presumably, to see who was taking her daughter away from her. Susan and I were at her grandparents' house when Joyce arrived, and we went out to greet her. She later admitted that she was extremely nervous and even intimidated when I was introduced. Like Susan and Susan's



*The smile that captured a lonely heart*

grandmother, she was small; without meaning to, I towered over her and I didn't always smile when I should have.

She looked up me and began thus, "I understand you are marrying my daughter. I want you to know that I approve." She paused and then blurted out nervously, with a forced laugh, "I guess you'll marry her whether I approve or not."

Just so, I thought at the time—rather uncharitably in retrospect!



Besides loving her so much, or perhaps *because* I loved her so much, I always respected her and wanted to please her and I had a strong aversion to disappointing her. My poor-folks country upbringing left me at times not quite confident that I could make the big choices in a way that would make her happy. The first such confounding decision

was the engagement ring. Reluctant to risk buying something she didn't like, I asked her to pick out the ring of her choice.

We made a pilgrimage to the biggest jewelry store in the city, and to my secret satisfaction she chose a non-traditional ring, a lovely translucent opal set in an oval of diamonds. It was a marvelous selection, and the first instance of her lifelong habit of going her own way, traditional when it suited her but unafraid to strike out in a different direction if that pleased her. She also chose traditional simple gold bands for our wedding rings.



*What are you looking at?*

It was on the sidewalk as we emerged from the jewelry store after having selected her engagement ring that she turned to me and took my hands in hers, her upturned face wreathed in a dazzling ecstatic



*Open cockpit, a hint of auburn, the Susie smile—ready for the open road!*

expression that subsumed her whole being. I had never seen her display so much emotion and sheer loving affection before, and I only saw it once more, just after the wedding ceremony, as we shall see.

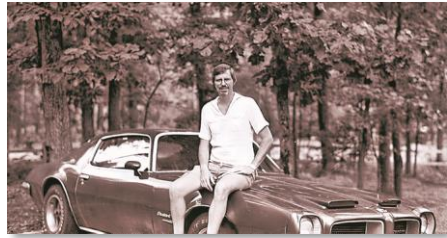
"I don't know what you've done to me. This is not who I am. I've always been reserved and in control. No one has ever made me feel

this way before."

It was an affirmation of love so total, so raw, so intense, so intimate, so elemental that I was overwhelmed by her radiant beauty and seductive female allure, by the impossible reality of being loved by such a woman, by the end at last of longing for the love of a good woman. Now, fifty-five years later, those words hang in the mists of memory, a bitter-sweet remnant of a lost world, where anything and everything was still possible.



Next came the matter of the new car. She knew I loved cars, so she was not surprised when I became infatuated with Pontiac's newly released Firebird 400, so named for its engine displacement—a sleek low-slung fastback V-eight four-seater that could run like a deer, a worthy successor to the muscle cars of the 1960s. That summer we trekked to a dealership together to buy one, a beauty in Verdoro Green.



*Susie's fast car, with chauffeur*

After the contract was signed and payment arranged, the salesman gave me two sets of keys. Without even thinking, I immediately turned and slid one set across the table to her. Her eyes grew wide



*Here's what I think of you, you. . .man!*

with disbelief. Could I possibly trust her with my new prized possession? Yet, I did so without hesitation because in my mind we were already married so of course the car was hers as well as

mine—it was ours together.

If I ever had doubts that we were well matched they disappeared when she got behind the wheel. At only 5 feet tall she had to sit on a cushion to see over the dash but she took to that big V8 like a duck to water. She was a bit heavy on the throttle and late on the brakes for my comfort but she never made a mistake or misjudgment, something I can't necessarily claim for myself.

It was during that first summer that her true personality emerged. I discovered—to my delight—that she had a keen sense of humor, a delightful air of frivolity and a girlish streak of mischievousness. The first instance took place at her grandparents' house. Naturally if you are a young man with a new car, it must be washed. And, summer is the time to do it. One lazy Saturday afternoon, I pulled the car onto the grass and got out hose, soap, sponge and chamois cloth. After lathering the car up I laid the hose down to scrub a side panel.



*I am woman. . .aren't I beautiful!*

Suddenly, I was doused with spray from the hose. I stood up and looked around, to see her giggling with glee as she dropped the hose and ran. It didn't take long to catch her—she went barefoot outdoors most of the time—and I did the only thing a guy can do in such circumstances: I scooped her up and carried her down to the pond. Moments later there was a tremendous splash as she hit the water. She came out dripping wet and smiling, not at all mad at me. She later admitted, to my chagrin, that I wasn't the first to give her the toss—but thankfully I was the last.

Perhaps it was a test—I wouldn't put it past her; who knows what goes on in the inscrutable mind of a female—but if it was, I guess I passed.

## Susie's Garden



Susan's impish and mischievous personality followed us all the days of our marriage. It emerged even during our last vacation together, in Colonial Williamsburg in May, just three months before she left us.

Palace Green, the long greensward avenue enclosed north and south by the Governor's Palace and Duke of Gloucester Street and east and west by the Palace Green loop, is bordered on both sides with majestic Catalpa trees. In May they produce a profusion of beautiful white



*Palace Green lined with catalpa trees*

flowers, blooms that eventually drop to the ground. On this occasion, the Green under the trees was covered with a white carpet of blossoms, a setting that inspired me to shoot a 360-degree panorama. I left her on the loop in front of George Wythe house and



*Susan photo-bombs panorama!*

took a vantage point in the middle of the Green. The multi-exposure shoot proceeded without incident, and it wasn't until I finished that I noticed her in the distance, in the middle of the green. She had photo bombed my panorama!

Zooming in for an enlargement of the relevant photo reveals that she is laughing and waving at me, happy at having once again pulled off one of those mischievous Susie tricks that drew me to her from the beginning and that were so integral to her personality.



Her ever-entertaining *joie de vivre* kept our marriage fresh and alive. That sunny kaleidoscopic spirit often reminded me of a key passage near the end of Jane Austen's most popular novel, *Pride and*

## Susie's Garden

*Prejudice.* For those unfamiliar with the plot, it revolves around the tempestuous courtship between lively and pretty gentry (landowner) class Elizabeth Bennet and rich upper crust estate owner Fitzwilliam Darcy, the latter too haughty (pride) to "give consequence" to Elizabeth. Darcy's initial pointed disdain for her leaves Elizabeth with an unfavorable first impression of him (prejudice).

But Darcy soon begins to take notice of Elizabeth, whose high spirits cannot be ignored and who is, to his dismay, not at all impressed by his money or his status in society. He falls in love with her despite his scruples about allying himself with her sometimes raucous and intemperate family—but then he notoriously botches his proposal. After many false starts and misunderstandings, they finally resolve their differences, and an engagement follows.

After they are engaged, Elizabeth, "spirits soon rising to playfulness again," asks Darcy how it was that he ever overcame his initial reservations and fell in love with her. Darcy is puzzled and can't really explain how it happened.



*The Susie smile that says watch out!*

"I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun." (I have the advantage over Darcy. I can pinpoint my time and place precisely.)

She answers for him, "Now be sincere, did you admire me for my impertinence?"

Darcy's reply says it all, "For the liveliness of your mind I did."

This, I believe captures the essence of the spell Susan cast over

## Susie's Garden

me. She was lively, mischievous, feisty, teasing, and highly intelligent—perpetually new and original. She was like an elaborate, sparkling, whirling child's wind-up toy, a mystery curio that never did the same thing twice—always fascinating, always captivating, endlessly entertaining.

She was a one-of-a-kind original, and her ever-present girlish playfulness was catnip in a skirt to a hitherto lonely young man.

But, no shrinking violet, she—she stood her ground and she gave as good as she got. Our marriage was never dull. We debated everything imaginable, from the trivial to the sublime for the sheer fun of it. Her quirky personality meant she delighted in tossing out manifestly silly propositions to see how I would react and to spark a new disquisition.

These back-and-forths were intellectually challenging and enlightening for both of us, as well as just plain fun—especially the silly ones. We simply enjoyed being with each other. Her mother once said to us, "You two laugh a lot." And it was true, we did laugh a lot, a sure sign of a well-matched pair and a healthy pairing—and quite a compliment, I always thought, from a mother-in-law.

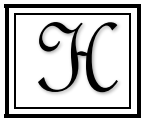


*Hey there, young man; what'cha 'doin'?*

## *For the Heart of a Woman*



*. . .some might argue that one can never know  
What's in the heart of a woman—  
For they are strange and mysterious creatures,  
And a man must be a mind reader  
If he ever wishes to make them happy.  
— Richelle Mead*



How does one win the heart of a woman? Poets through the ages have struggled without success to answer that question. Nor do I have a clue. I did win Susan's heart, although I'm not quite sure how—other than perhaps by courting her with unwavering love and sincerity. Along the way I discovered that plenty of men had tried before me. With that as introduction, and before we dive more deeply into the life Susan and I lived together, the next two chapters examine, first, the attention her looks and personality drew from other men, and second, life experiences and choices from the past that may have contributed to a premature passing.



Well into that first summer, one significant event took place that

provided my first brief glimpse into Susan's life before we met. We were at her grandparents' home. Susan was inside and I was outside—she had asked me to wait elsewhere because she was expecting a visitor. Naturally I was curious but her response was uncharacteristically vague and a little forced, even impatient—

“There's someone I have to talk to.”

I didn't press the matter but I must confess to a bit of apprehension at the time. Who was this mysterious visitor? And what did the appearance signify for the two of us as a couple?



*The first impression was of a young, naïve girl about to become a woman*

A car drove up and parked at the walk to her grandparents' back door—the exact spot where I had parked that providential night months ago. A young man got out and proceeded to knock on the back door. His body language spoke of urgency and determination. He was admitted, the door closed and I was left to speculate as to who he was and what his mission might be. He was a nice-looking guy, about my age, and I must confess to a pang of, what? Jealousy? Doubt? Anxiety?

In any case, sometime later he emerged and departed in his car as rapidly as he had arrived. I never asked Susan who he was or why he had come, but I can only guess that he was a boyfriend—now former boyfriend—come perhaps to plead his case. In vain if so because at that point Susan wore her engagement ring proudly and prominently.

Perhaps I should have felt a twinge of sympathy for that young man

for he seemed like a decent sort and he had just lost the most profoundly ennobling thing a man can ever experience—the love of a



*Susan sightseeing in the Alps  
with family, 1967*

good woman. But if I did, it was brief. Once again, I was left to breathe a silent prayer of relief and thankfulness that she had said yes.



Susan held her past very close, sharing very little of the who, when and where. It took the accumulation of little tidbits revealed gradually and

offhandedly over the years to understand just how many men had pursued her as a young woman, long before I came on the scene. From her time in Italy and Europe as the emerging young daughter of a high school English teacher and the stepdaughter of an army sergeant, to those college dates with marines, even to chance airplane seatmate encounters as a professional woman traveling on business after we were married, I could tell that other men repeatedly saw in her what I saw.



*Susan in Venice, across  
canal from Abbazia di San  
Giorgio Maggiore, 1966*

Despite all of this, she had not an ounce of vanity, and I could never get her to admit that she was a serenely beautiful woman. In essence I think it just wasn't important to her. I'm also not sure she believed it herself. A few years ago, when I told her for the millionth time that as a young woman, she was beautiful, she replied matter-of-factly and rather dismissively that she never thought she was but that men seemed to think so.

I can recall other examples she related besides the marines and the

boyfriend, although most have been lost to the passage of time and the fading of memory over the years. As a high school and college age teenager, she spent summers with her mother in Vicenza while her stepfather was stationed in Italy. More than once while walking along Italian city streets a young Italian man would walk by and pat her on the backside, apparently standard practice for the era. I bristle at the thought but I can't change the past. Nevertheless, one is left to wonder what effect, if any, this might have had on her sense of personal security.

To make occasional return trips to the states she sometimes had to fly standby on military transport airplanes as a family economy measure. These flights originated from Germany so she had to ride a train to and from the military airport. On more than one occasion while on these flights a soldier would try it on with her, but these were easy to rebuff. After all, the plane was full of fit and strong young combat-ready men in an era still imbued with a strongly enforced code of chivalry. One word from her would have brought many rescuers.



*Susan and mother, Joyce, at Milano Italy airport, 1966*

As a civilian flying standby, she was never guaranteed a seat. Since the family couldn't always afford otherwise, she often had to wait for a vacancy. On one occasion she simply couldn't get a flight. That left her to return by train to Italy to try again on another day. During one such trip, after she found her seat, a young officer sat down beside her and began a conversation.

To recall Susan's description, at the time she was still a bit naive and she participated innocently enough. The officer was smooth, and he kept the chatter going for the entire trip. On arrival, he offered to escort her home. She accepted, perhaps not the best decision she

ever made, she admitted.

At her door, the officer asked if he could come in and share a drink. Susan gave him her mysterious, ageless female smile, thanked him for a lovely trip, unlocked the door, and went in. The no doubt disappointed

officer was, in her words, a gentleman after all and he left without protest, perhaps to ponder lost opportunity.

On retelling this incident Susan admitted that she had unwittingly taken a chance that could have turned out very differently.



*Susan in high school graduation gown and mortarboard*

My view? Susan was being charitable. That officer was no gentleman. One must question the motive of anyone who would try to pick up a young girl who was still a teenager. And, while Susan was attractive at any age she was also small and very innocent, even naïve in appearance, which would have made her seem even younger and more vulnerable, as is evident from her Alpine family photo (see prior page).

She was hardly more than a child. No man with honorable intent would ever have considered such an attempt.



I recall a photograph from her time in Europe. In the photo, likely taken by her mother but lost to us when her mother passed, she is dancing with a strapping young blond-haired German or Austrian man dressed in traditional folk costume. She is obviously having the time of her life, and I was instantly envious of her enjoyment of the moment and of his attentions, partly because I can't dance a lick.

## Susie's Garden

(Susan often pointed out in wistful sorrow that I had absolutely no sense of rhythm.)

Although I should have suppressed the urge, I could not help remarking on her past life in the company of other men. She countered that she was with me now, and whatever happened in the past was past. There was no choice but to accept this verdict; in the end we don't own those we hold dear, we must simply love them for who they are and hope that they love us in return.

The last example I remember took place on a business flight to the west coast. Susan related the details to me when she returned home. Once again, a man sitting in the seat next to her struck up a conversation. By this time, she was no longer the innocent young ingenue but rather a mature married woman, mother and professional. Nor was she naive; she knew exactly what the man was after.



*Long flowing hair,  
beautiful young lady*

She played along until the plane landed, after which the loquacious passenger followed her to the luggage carousel. There, he popped the question: Would you like come to the lounge and have a drink with me? She picked up her suitcase, gave him her enigmatic Mona Lisa smile—the kind that only a woman can bestow—thanked him for the conversation, and walked away without looking back.

I think she told me about the incident because she didn't want to keep anything from me. But it also seemed clear that a part of her was just a bit pleased that men still found her attractive. On my part, there was a brief spark of jealousy. But on reflection that thought quickly changed to understanding, to realization of the importance to her of

still being thought desirable. God knows, I thought so, although by this time I suspect she had begun to think my opinion a bit biased and perhaps therefore to be discounted. It must have been reassuring to her that others still thought so too.

In later years, when age had started to take its unwelcome toll, and especially when she began to need medical care, I carried a collection of her best youthful photos on my phone, ready to show her off to anyone who would look and listen. People would often exclaim, "My God, she's *beautiful!*" Yes, she certainly was. And it was clear that others agreed.



Returning to the central question, what led Susan to accept me? Certainly, I courted her—but then so did others. In a rational world, choice always lies with the woman. With so many possibilities, I am



*For the love of a good woman. . .*

left to ponder the unknowable. Surely of all the men who pursued her as a young woman others must have genuinely cared for her, have even hinted at marriage. Why me, then?

Perhaps in her mind it was time to marry and while my appearance was fortuitous for me, for her she would have been the duckling imprinting when the time was right. Or, maybe she sensed, below the level of conscious thought, that I was her intellectual equal—or close enough—something that, given her lively and highly intelligent mind, she would have needed to keep a marriage fresh and interesting.

Did she also sense that I was a bit of a maverick and might thereby provide the spice of a challenge in the bargain? Given her mischievous nature, maybe she saw she could tease me with impunity, as Elizabeth Bennet did Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Perceptive as she was, she had to have sensed early on that my love for her was sincere, committed and enduring—perhaps I was the first to truly convince her of that. Or, in the mysterious ways of the female maybe she just loved me without conscious thought or reason—just as I loved her at an instinctive level from the beginning, before knowing anything about her.

What do *I* think? Having been pursued by so many men, she had to have known what she wanted. My guess is that at the end of that first week—when I asked to see her every day—her quick mind had anticipated where this was going and the question merely confirmed what she already knew. Her firm and unhesitating “yes” was affirmation of a choice already made, of whom she would marry. She now only had to wait for me to propose. I will never know, but I am eternally grateful that she said yes for when she did my life began.

## The Secret Never Told



*One's for sorrow, Two's for joy,  
Three's for a girl, and Four's for a boy,  
Five's for silver, Six for gold,  
Seven's for a secret, never told.*

— “One for Sorrow” AKA magpie counting song  
Traditional British nursery rhyme



It wasn't until after Susan was gone that I began to try to unravel the mystery of the events and factors that led to what I have come to believe was a premature passing. It wasn't so much a matter of unearthing new information, although there was some of that, particularly the discovery of a treasure trove of her mother's 1950s



*I did it!*

and 1960s slides that Susan brought home when her mother passed. Rather it was more a matter of connecting dots between things I already knew—especially experiences from her childhood and teenage years.

The conclusion I have reached is that her symptoms in decline were entirely in line with nicotine addiction—a supposition I can never prove. As we know, correlation is not proof of causation—but it is evidence and her condition is too consistent with known medical consequences to ignore. There remains the challenge of understanding why a recognized destructive lifelong habit, if indeed such it was, never led a surpassingly intelligent woman to diagnose her own problem and thereby save herself.



Four months after our engagement Susan and I were married, on August 22, 1970 in a traditional church ceremony. The reception was held at her grandparents' house and the smiles on her face in the day's photos are positively radiant. One memory lingers from the ride from the church to her grandparents' house. She turned to me in the car



*Susan loved rabbit ears*

and held up her hand, flashing her wedding ring for me to admire.

"I did it!" she exclaimed beatifically, her face positively luminous with jubilation.

It was as if every fiber of her being had been transformed. Is it possible that she had doubted that anyone would

ever love her sincerely enough to want to marry her? Realizing how attractive she was and how entralling her personality was, in retrospect I find that difficult to believe. At the time it was simply a happy manifestation of her personality. My only thought at that moment was that my wish for the love of a good woman had been fulfilled by the lovely bride sitting next to me.

## Susie's Garden

It has only been recently that I began to correlate the two ring incidents and to try to guess how they might fit together in a coherent whole. It is all speculation—now that she is gone, along with all those who knew of her family life when she was growing up, the full story can never be known.

Although she was normally a very happy, even ebullient woman, and although she laughed frequently and readily enough, there was still



*Pensive Susan, the complex woman behind the quick smile*

that little imperceptible reticence, a reluctance to reveal too much of herself. She could be outgoing and friendly with everyone in gatherings as well as teasing and mischievous with me—but she could also go off by herself and seemingly be content to be alone—perhaps not an unusual trait for an only child, for such she was.



For many years, Susan reserved her life before we met as an unexplored land, leaving me with very little insight into her early years. Although normally introverted, I was quite the opposite with her—I shared everything from the beginning; she soon knew my entire life story.

## Susie's Garden

What I do know is that she was born in Temple, Texas in 1947, the daughter of Texan and army colonel Travis Turner and Virginian Joyce Louise Payne. As with other military children, she moved frequently, living in, among other places, Chase City, Virginia; with her grandparents, Fred and Bessie, in town before they moved out into the county; and in Italy for a time with her mother and stepfather.

While attending college she stayed with her grandparents at their rural retirement home. Away from college she lived with her mother and stepfather in his native state, where they moved after his discharge from the army. Beyond that, there isn't much except a few reluctantly revealed hints over time of childhood influences that shaped her personality and outlook on life.

Photographs made by her mother of her as a busy toddler, an active young girl, a happy high school student and a maturing young college woman, all reveal her characteristic smile and impish personality. In short, she grew up with a happy spirit and a naturally sunny disposition that allowed her to have fun at whatever she did.



*Budding enchantress  
tosses coy look over  
shoulder*

A few stories have followed her from childhood, incidents that suggest the impish little girl was there from the beginning. One in particular involving a cousin playmate concerns the time young Susan turned hair stylist. At about four years of age or so she suggested to said cousin that they take turns cutting each other's hair. After all, their mothers cut theirs so why couldn't they do the same for each other? Concurrence was obtained, and since it was Susan's idea she was first up to bat with the scissors.

After happily mangling her cousin's hair but before she had a chance to turn over the scissors for a return treatment they were discovered.

Needless to say, her career as hair stylist came to an abrupt end—and with far less consequences to her own appearance than to that to her

cousin.



But all was not sunshine and roses. We are all scarred by our past, especially by things that happen in childhood. How we handle them can color the rest of our lives. I rarely saw Susan express the sort of extreme emotion first seen when buying her engagement ring and again after our wedding. These two incidences —the engagement ring and the wedding ring—coincided with tangible traditional mileposts on the way to marriage. Each a symbol of love and union, both evoked from her almost a state of euphoria. Coincidence, or something deeper? Why this had such a transformative effect on her,



*Husband gets rabbit ears*

I never asked—in fact I only realized the possibility of a connection between the two after she was gone.

For me, marriage to her was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, an escape from loneliness rooted in my own childhood experiences: a shy and introverted personality, a broken parental marriage and

a mother too overwhelmed by events she couldn't control to openly express love for her children.

For Susan, perhaps her periods of silent self-sufficiency also arose from less than happy childhood experiences. Although I always wanted to know more about her it took perseverance over time to occasionally draw forth little vignettes and to begin to piece together a picture of the people and events along the tangled path that formed her complex personality.

As an only child, she undoubtedly experienced longer periods of solitude than in families with multiple siblings. For all of that, all of the photographic evidence going back to her early childhood conveys nothing but the image of a happy child and outgoing young woman. Nevertheless. . .

## Susie's Garden

At eight or nine years of age her mother divorced her father and he abandoned all contact with her—he made no attempt to see her again for the rest of his life. She acknowledged to me that this was a disappointment to her as a child.



*Young Susie, same sunny smile*

Eventually her mother remarried, this time to an Army sergeant and WWII veteran. From the beginning he made it clear by the cold and distant way he treated Susan that she was in the way and that he wanted nothing to do with her. His manner toward her was stern and strict rather than kind and supportive.

For an independent, intelligent, lively and self-motivated young woman this would have created smoldering resentment. She didn't need someone telling her what to do and how to behave; even at a young age she was perfectly capable of deciding that for herself.

Photographs of them together from her early womanhood convey a *sub rosa* hint of tension that suggests distance in the relationship. Over time, Susan revealed to me that she came to dislike her stepfather

intensely for his cold and critical manner toward her. His sly animosity continued even after we were married. He made it clear by inuendo that if he were the survivor of his marriage to her mother Susan



*Susan's high school junior prom night*

would not inherit her mother's estate.

Fortunately, Susan convinced her mother to divide their financial assets so that when she passed Susan inherited her half. Even at the end, her stepfather spitefully refused to give Susan her mother's jewelry collection, a traditional mother-to-daughter bequest.

On top of this, there was the fact that both her father and her stepfather were military; there were frequent posting and subsequent moves, with attendant change of schools and the necessity of saying goodbye to one set of friends and trying to fit in with another. As a military child I had experienced similar disruption in the first few years but my mother settled down when I was ten. For Susan, this vagabond existence was a constant, an inescapable nomadic way of life.



*Senior prom night, all dressed up  
and ready to dance!*

Only later, in the last months before she left us, did she relate the effects of this inconstancy, of the inability to form long-term childhood friendships, on her happiness. I could detect an undercurrent of bitterness in her voice, sorrow for opportunity lost that could never be reclaimed. Lack of roots, piled on top of unhappy experiences with the two central male figures in her childhood, were seemingly a nagging undercurrent beneath her otherwise effervescent personality.

We never talked specifically about this, but despite her outgoing and happy personality she may have scrutinized each young man who took an interest in her a bit more carefully for sincerity and constancy that she might have otherwise. Despite having been courted by a long line of suitors, she accepted none of them. When I came along

perhaps my evident unconditional love for her was the first time anyone had truly given her confidence that there was someone in the world who valued her above all else, who loved her unreservedly. And who asked nothing of her other than to be loved in return.



There is a dichotomy between her sunny and outgoing personality and her tendency to seek solitude that begs for explanation, for uncovering the underlying causes. The fact is that Susan smoked cigarettes when I met her and for decades afterward. She only stopped when a hospital stay prevented it, a problem she solved by switching to nicotine gum.

Smoking may have been simply a socially acceptable habit that she picked up as a youth, as did many young people of our era. But there is also a belief among some that smoking can become a form of self-medication. Perhaps it was so with Susan, a way of coping with the tensions arising in an otherwise happy woman from living under the thumb of a controlling and demanding stepfather.

Whichever the case, once addicted to nicotine it would have been difficult to give up, as many have discovered. The consequences of nicotine addiction are exactly in accord with the symptoms she



*Happy college graduate, summer 1970*

developed as her health declined. Nicotine gum can be a temporary expedient when one is trying to break the smoking habit. But while not as damaging to the lungs, long term use of nicotine gum is still harmful to the

body in many ways, among them high blood pressure, heart disease, insulin resistance, diabetes, dental problems and premature hair loss.

High blood pressure and diabetes can, in turn, contribute directly to kidney failure. She experienced all of these without exception and they were likely a significant contributor to her decline.

Different individuals undoubtedly exhibit different tolerances for and responses to toxins; the evidence suggests that Susan was particularly susceptible in her later years.

The regret that will not go away is that I wish I could have understood her well enough to better responded to hidden needs she was never willing to share, veiled behind her gorgeous smile and her quiet self-sufficiency. I also wish I had thought to look into the long-term effects of nicotine use.



*You better watch out; I know  
what you are thinking*

None of us is perfect, least of all myself, and one does not necessarily have time to think about future problems and consequences in the press of day-to-day living. I loved her unreservedly, but love alone does not expunge the gives and takes of daily life, the slights, the inattentions, the gruff or sharp words, the failure to recognize and respond to something the other dearly wants, the disappointment that comes from being ignored or misunderstood.

Knowing her aversion to talking about "feelings" I suspect she would have pooh-poohed and deflected any attempt to draw her out about her past. In any case, I am grateful that I was given the opportunity to place her on a pedestal of love, devotion, and admiration, from which she never again had to face an unfriendly environment.

## Susie's Garden

## Ruth Meets Susan, Is Routed

*“Meeting my future mother-in-law soon—  
wish me luck, patience, and a lot of grace!*

— Anonymous



Looking back over the years, the thought strikes me that there must have been a flaw in my upbringing because I was often clueless when it came to knowing how to treat the woman I loved deeply with the attention and consideration she deserved. While she had said yes when I proposed, nevertheless on many occasions I simply made mistakes of omission and lack of recognition of her subtle signs of discontent that should have served as guideposts.



*Susan, Ruth, new daughter*

As a result, sometimes disappointed and often hurt as well, nevertheless over time Susan learned to cope. Having met my mother, Ruth, and knowing I came from a broken home, she came to understand that perhaps I hadn't had the necessary training in how to treat a lady. Susan

adopted a strategy for dealing with such failings. When something didn't meet her exacting standards, she would assume a lecturing tone of voice and exclaim, "Now Ruth, you know better than that." There was no escape from the justice of that.

(Given that she was as near perfection as a woman can be she never let me down, not once in 55 years of gloriously happy marriage.)

As with all marriages, it was eventually time for me to take my bride-to-be home to meet her new mother-in-law. Her first encounter with my mother turned out to be one of those tone setters for both sides that put firm boundaries in place, limits that lasted for the rest of my mother's life. For Susan, still young and not yet the mature, confident and assertive woman she would become, the thought of meeting my mother—about whom she had heard so much, little of it good—was



*Three gardeners in action*

cause for rising doubts. These misgivings she carefully concealed from me—until we exited the Interstate. Then it came tumbling out.

She looked up at me, almost panic stricken, her eyes wide and a bit desperate with anxiety. "Michael, do we have to meet your mother? I am so nervous; what will she think of me? I don't want to go. Can we turn back now?" she pleaded.

I assured her that it was too late to turn back and that she shouldn't worry because we would get through the event no matter how my mother behaved. Besides, I loved her too much to let anything happen to her. If it got too bad, we would leave early. Somewhat mollified by the last offer, she subsided into uneasy silence.

The stay began with the usual awkwardness that such encounters engender, but Ruth was on her best behavior and it soon smoothed out into a pleasant stay. Susan was no doubt on the verge of deciding that Ruth wasn't such an ogre after all. Until—

Until my mother, reverting to old habits, cornered me one day in the hall leading to her bedrooms. It was a long dark tunnel of a hall, with an alcove that provided a perfect secluded place for my mother to stage an ambush. She began haranguing me about something, I can't remember what—too far back in time.

At that point Susan found us. "Michael," she said firmly, "I want to talk to your mother."

Relieved to be rescued but otherwise unsuspecting, I made my escape. Soon she emerged from the tunnel and sat down without comment. Later that day, I asked what she had talked to Ruth about and she told me some of what had been said. She had overheard what was happening, and, hackles up, she intervened. She read Ruth the riot act—something along the lines of "Don't you ever speak to Michael that way again if you know what's good for you."

Susan wouldn't say exactly what wrath she had threatened to unleash, but afterward she hinted obliquely that she may have suggested that Ruth should consider carefully to whom her son was



*Susan and Ruth became almost friends*

most likely to be loyal to once he was married. Whatever she said, it must have been dire because the effect was instant and transformational. In that moment, my mother learned to fear Susan. Forever after, she accorded Susan the utmost deference and respect. Nor was I ever cornered again. Clearly, Susan didn't need my protection from Ruth; she was the one doing the protecting.

Eventually they became almost friends. On closer acquaintance Susan discovered that she shared a love of needlework, flowers, and birds with Ruth. There is a photograph of Susan, our daughter and Ruth digging up flower bulbs from Ruth's back yard for replanting.



## Susie's Garden

Susan was not done with family interventions. When Ruth passed away, we attended her funeral along with many family members and local friends and acquaintances. The chapel was overflowing with guests; despite her sometimes-acerbic personality our mother had clearly impacted many lives in a positive way.

There was a main chapel where guests sat and an alcove off to one side where, according to local custom, family sat—all except any family members directly involved in the proceedings. We had decided that we would dispense with a minister and conduct



*Mementos of Ruth's life*

the services ourselves, brothers Ron, Andy, and myself, together with Andy's son, Jonathan—with each of us talking about what Ruth meant to us. Andy, as a lay minister, would oversee the proceedings.

When it was time for the service to begin, we four sat down on the front row, and other relatives dutifully filed into the family alcove. All except Susan. She made a bee line for a seat beside me on the front row. Ron, ever the proper gentleman for protocol, intercepted her and gently reminded her of the local custom regarding separate seating for relatives. Susan didn't slow down.

"I'm sitting with my husband," she said in a firm, no-nonsense tone that ended all conversation.

Faced with a *fait accompli*, Ron gave up and took his own front row seat. Seeing this the other wives hastily abandoned the alcove and, grinning ear to ear, joined their husbands.

It was a lovely service, each of us sharing our unique perspective. Perhaps the most emotionally evocative tribute of all came from Andy's son; he had a genuine, heartfelt way with words that carried

## Susie's Garden

the audience with him.

No one said a word afterward about seating arrangements. Who knows, perhaps Susan started a new tradition that day.

## Susie's Garden

## We Begin



*"Daisys, Daffodils and Kitty Cats"*  
— Susan, when asked what she believed in



We began our marriage in a ground floor one-bedroom apartment in a complex across the street from her *alma mater*, the home to three generations of her family—her mother, Susan herself and our daughter. It had a living room with walkout sliding glass door, a kitchen, a dining nook, and a long hall that led to a bedroom and bath at the back of the apartment—just the right sort of place for a bright young couple to begin their marriage.



*Beware! Susan's impish smile portents mischief afoot*

After we were wed, a delegation of very kind and friendly church

## Susie's Garden

people came to visit, following up on our appearance at their church for our vows. They came to invite us to attend church services with them regularly. When we politely waffled a bit, one of them asked what our beliefs were, likely inquiring as to whether we were more inclined toward another denomination or a different interpretation of scripture.



*I love you Michael, even if you can't dance!*

covered with flowers and bird feeders, and we had many cats over the years.

I remember Susan's answer well. Ever the honest one when dissembling would not do, she spoke for both of us.

"My philosophy is simple; I believe in daisies, daffodils & kitty cats."

As we discovered later, her belief system also included birds. Once we had a house, our yard was



Early in our marriage, she decided that she wanted to manage the family money, which included taking charge of the check book. Since all family money was ours together the suggestion was eminently fair and she took over bill paying and other aspects of our finances. That went well for a while, but then there came a time when one of the bills, the monthly telephone statement, didn't make sense.

One day I noticed her at the kitchenette table, poring over the check book, with a scattering of papers laid out on the table. I asked what

was wrong. She looked up, exasperated. "I don't understand this phone bill. I've paid it on time every month since we've been here and yet the balance just keeps growing every month." I picked up the bill, to find a staggering number amounting to many hundred dollars.

"This can't be right. . ."

"I know, but I can't seem to find the problem."

I took a second look, this time more carefully. "Hmm," I said, trying to be noncommittal.

"What?" she demanded peevishly.

I tried to be gentle. "I'm not sure, but it appears that you may have been paying a plus balance on the account as if it were the monthly charge." She looked crestfallen as I handed the bill back to her. "I don't know how that could have happened, but perhaps you overpaid a bill by mistake or paid the same bill more than once thus accumulating a positive balance above the actual monthly bill. From there it must have just grown." She thanked me and resumed her bill paying chores.

She handled the family finances for ten years and then, satisfied I suppose, that family money really was hers she relinquished the checkbook back to me. (Susan and her mother had very cleverly included "all my worldly goods" in my vows but had somehow left out the "love, honor and *obey*" part of hers!) Thereafter, she got her own book of blank checks for freedom of action when it came to shopping.



*Susan poses outside our first apartment*

It was not long after the initial bill mix-up that she confessed that she was a bit dyslexic. Whether that factored into the bill overage or not,

it was a natural mistake—I've done far worse. I never mentioned it again, never teased her about it.



Our first married life *contretemps* occurred while we were still living in our one-bedroom apartment. Like most of our subsequent fallings out, it happened because I disappointed her or hurt her feelings, usually in a way that I was oblivious to—she had a finely honed sense of propriety and proper conduct and she expected treatment worthy of a loving wife and a lady. Unfortunately, my upbringing hadn't included those teachings and I was left to discover the rules of the marriage road by painful trial and error—painful for both of us, unfortunately.

In this case, I don't remember what I did but for the first time in our marriage she was hurt and angry. She stormed out of our apartment with a resounding wham of the door for emphasis, furious with me. I went down the long hall to our bedroom to lay down and try to read

a book, all the while cursing myself for being so obtuse and wondering if she would ever come back. The agony for me was that the last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt her. And now it had happened. What would be the consequences?



*Who gave you permission to look at me?*

Was it so bad that our marriage was over already? Would she return only briefly, to pack clothes and thence to move back in with her grandparents? This dire possibility loomed over everything else in my consciousness. It was new territory—in the sudden emptiness of her departure this frightening and all too real prospect left me with a

numb, nameless dread of what might come next. It was a hopeless, helpless empty feeling that I had never felt before. I tried to read but couldn't.

An hour later I heard the apartment door open and I stepped out into the hall, hardly daring to hope that she had forgiven me, that she was



*No, I haven't forgotten what you did, and  
don't ever do it again.*

back for good. There she stood at the other end of the hall, still hurt and angry and still crying. Seeing me, she began throwing bag after bag of Hershey's Kisses chocolate candy at me, all the while excoriating me in no uncertain terms for my

inexcusable ignorance. The chocolate Kisses were, of course, symbolic of real kisses, her way of showing that she forgave me—but the hurt tears said, beware, I'm not over it yet, and don't you *ever* make that mistake again.

That was my Susie. For every offense, of which there were many, I was always forgiven—although sometimes it took a while.

## Susie's Garden

## Young Professionals



*I love you not only for what you are  
but for what I am when I am with you.*  
— Elizabeth Barrett Browning

**S**usan was initially hired into a section within the same organizational "branch" where I worked. Her section consisted primarily of non-professional women who digitized strip charts of data taken during tests of weapon components. The group had their own small building, overseen by the only male employee there, a man named Herb. Naturally in the culture of the day the group became known as "Herb's Harem." Given her pending college degree and her as yet unrevealed intelligence, she was drastically underemployed. But it was a foot in the door.



*Stylish young professional  
woman*

## Susie's Garden

I sometimes reflect on the sheer chance of meeting Susan. What if I had not walked through our office during the fifteen-minute window while Susan sat at the Secretary's desk, checking in? Once she disappeared into that other building I might never have known she existed, let alone met and fallen in love with her. I shudder at the thought.

Thankfully, I did walk through the office during the most important 15 minutes of my life. Thankfully I did find the courage to ask our secretary for her phone number. Finally, and most thankfully of all, she did say yes. At that moment, life began—everything thereafter became possible.

I always said our getting together was destiny. When we met, she had a cat named Michael and as a child I had had a dog named Susie. It seemed to me that it must have been karma. Needless to say, she



*My predecessor, Michael the cat*

never quite saw it that way—I suspect the comparison that comes to mind explains her objection.

After our engagement was announced but before her conversion to permanent status, Susan continued in her non-professional job, but with her college degree conversion

to permanent professional status was almost a certainty if our base had the necessary billet, i.e. hiring headroom, for her category of professional. Thus, we worked temporarily in the same group. So long as we were engaged this was fine organizationally, but we knew that once we were married one of us would have to move to another organization because of agency anti-nepotism rules.



During this interregnum one small but memorable incident occurred. By now we had long since begun spending all our hours after work together. One evening Susan told me that a certain young professional in our overall organization had become a bit

hands-on with her. He was a nice mild-mannered fellow and perhaps it was innocent enough, but I was having none of it. I confronted the gentleman in the parking lot the next day.

With a hint of firm, no nonsense edge to my voice I warned him, "Susan tells me you have made a habit of touching her." I paused for effect. "*Keep your hands off my fiancée.*" He stammered out an apology and allowed that he meant nothing by it; he was just friendly by nature. Point made, I said no more.

I told Susan what I had done that evening and she said it hadn't been necessary but I think she was secretly pleased. Perhaps she even engineered it as a test to see what I would do—else why would she have mentioned it; after all, she could have as easily given him the marine "men amuse me" ice bath. She wasn't devious but she was subtle. The ways of the female of the species are unknowable to us mere mortals.



Susan was in time converted to permanent status. The policy at our agency was that new professional employees worked three months in



*You could have picked a warmer day for this trip, dear*

the organization that had hired them and they then made three training rotations of three months each to other groups. At the end of that first year, they returned to home base and settled into their permanent job. The goal of the program was to broaden the experience of new employees and to assess their potential in a variety of circumstances. Also, it gave new hires a chance to experience other alternatives

and on occasion discover jobs they liked better.

While she was on rotation, Susan became pregnant with our first

## Susie's Garden

child. As with many pregnancies, she didn't always feel her best. On one particular rotation she ended up in a group housed in drafty temporary trailers, the slum dwellings of our base. Trainees, being temporary, tended to get the worst desks and office spaces and she was stuck in a dark corner at a spartan desk used only by trainees, leaving her with very little space of her own.



*Susan's quicksilver smile*

One day in the advanced stage of her first pregnancy, a day when she was feeling particularly uncomfortable, in walked a man dressed in an expensive business suit, attire marking him as a marketing representative of a company doing business with the military. Spying her in the corner and assuming she was a secretary, he approached and demanded of her in a rather imperious and condescending manner.

“I have a meeting. Get me a cup of coffee.”

She looked up at him, freezing him to stone with a baleful glare, and with a voice dripping with all the scorn that the female is capable of, inquired,

"Do you oink, too?"

Needless to say, the poor fellow turned tail and fled, no doubt having learned the hard way to be more considerate in the future when accosting pregnant women—or women in general for that matter.



This wasn't the only indicator that Susan was no pushover or shrinking violet. Although she never told me what she had done, I found a clipping in one of her files after she left us. It was a very polite letter to the local newspaper, commenting on the fact that the upcoming Challenger shuttle mission was carrying the first teacher into orbit.

Her question? Why was it that most interviews with teachers about the significance of the mission were made with male teachers? Since the teaching profession, especially below college level, is skewed



*The Bene Gesserit stare*

toward women, this seemed an injustice. She was right, as she always was when she took a stand. The woman was frustratingly infallible when it counted.

After her rotations she chose to find another job because of the afore mentioned

nepotism rule. Here, the new employee rotation rule paid off for her—she moved to a branch that had hosted one of her rotation assignments. There she began the first of the only two jobs she ever held as a professional, performing targeting analysis for long range weapon systems. The other job, discussed later, was in support of a tactical system.



Susan had an effect on me that is difficult to explain. Basking in the warmth of her love and affection, I was king of the world, and I wanted everyone, particularly other men, to know just how lucky I was and how unlucky they were.

One of the things that caught my attention from the beginning was the fact that she was, shall we say, manifestly and demonstrably *very* female. In the grip of my male pride of having her for myself I conceived the reckless, inconsiderate, and ultimately selfish idea of asking her to go to work each day in an ever so slightly more natural state. The idea was to generate even more envy among those who did not, would not, could not ever have this beautiful, untouchable creature.



*Patient Susan, posing for photographer husband*

Incredibly she agreed, although I dare say had I asked a few years down the road she would have given me her penetrating *Bene Gesserit* stare (Lady Jessica, consort of Duke Leto from *Dune*, for

non-sci-fi fans), the one that says emphatically, *what on earth could you possibly be thinking? I will do no such thing!* and put an emphatic stop to it right then and there. But we were still newlyweds, and she was sometimes willing to do things for me against her better judgement—things that she would have later nixed as she learned better to express her wishes.

So, off she went to work each morning in a most interesting state. Eventually however she told me she had to stop. It was just too disruptive—men were staring when they should be working. Looking back, I see the utter folly of this, but at the time I was, as I said, master of all God's creation—or so I believed.

## Susie's Garden

## *Beauty, Personality, Intelligence*



*She's wicked smart,  
Beautiful but not full of herself,  
Heart of gold and sweet.  
Sounds like a special person.*  
— From movie,  
“The Nine Lives of Christmas”

*Nothing is so necessary for a young man  
as the company of intelligent women.*  
— Leo Tolstoy

St took me a while to discover just how intelligent Susan was. The suspicion first arose when we began playing bridge together. I had learned in college, and I suppose Susan did the same. She counted cards carefully on every hand and she displayed a flair for playing well, even on the most difficult contracts. Given her physical attractiveness and lively personality, the addition of high intelligence made her the ideal woman. One suspects that her intelligence might have put some men off but for me it was magnetic, the cherry on top of the ice cream sundae. We kept each other well entertained.

Susan's obvious intelligence eventually led me to ask where she fell on the bell curve. The answer was, far out on the right tail of the

## Susie's Garden

distribution. I was forced to admit that she had a bit of an edge on me. Forever after, when we disagreed on something she would gaily bring up that difference. In the last months we were together she acknowledged that she had come close to acing the high school senior SAT test. Since she had a younger cousin who had in fact delivered a perfect score, I found her revelation creditable. I also found it silencing—although my score was comfortably above average it didn't match hers by a lot.

Susan was well-aware of her intelligence, and if she felt pride in anything it was not her physical attractiveness but rather her problem-solving ability—see photo and discussion that follows. In her youth, conventions had not yet changed and she sometimes kept



*Beauty, personality, intelligence — catnip in a skirt!*

her intelligence concealed, following Jane Austen's sarcastic dictum from *Northanger Abbey* lampooning the conventions of her day regarding female conduct: "A woman, especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can."

As an example, she related to me the story of her first high school driving class. She was the only girl in a group of young boys, many of them fine examples of budding young athletic manhood. The

## Susie's Garden

instructor, a savvy veteran of such sessions, set up a mock driver's display in front of the class, complete with steering wheel, accelerator pedal and brake. The setup was instrumented and the drill was to see who could hit the brake quickest once a signal was given.

The instructor went first and his time was recorded. Self-confidently the boys all gave it a go, only to discover to their chagrin that none could top the old gray-haired instructor. Then it was Susan's turn. She went to the mock cockpit and sat down, her mind quickly traversing a fraught decision tree.

The problem was twofold. She had immediately figured out how the instructor had beaten all those young bucks, and she knew she could do the same. But then there *were* all those handsome

young boys sitting there, watching her, all five feet and zero inches tall of her. Who knew how the humiliation of being beaten by a mere girl, and a tiny one at that, she reasoned, would affect them—or her prospects with them, for that matter.

The answer that she decided on was to refrain from showing them up. On retelling the story, she confessed that if she had it to do over again, she would have done it the instructor's way, recording the best time in the process.

What was the secret? Simply brake with the other foot, not the one on the accelerator. Years later, that little trick saved me from a serious accident.



*Bookish Susan relaxes with novel at her mother's apartment, Vicenza, Italy, 1967*



There is one more example that reveals her consummate skill when it came to problem solving. As a professional, she sat in many group meetings where the technical problems of the day were discussed, the purpose being to reach consensus on a solution. Invariably, at the beginning of the meeting, she would announce that the solution was thus-and-such. People would stare at her blankly and proceed with their discussion, ignoring her.

Susan would sit back, say nothing more, and wait for the inevitable *denouement*. Eventually, an hour or so later everyone would



converge to an answer. Satisfied, they would prepare to break up. Then, someone would remember, "Susan, isn't that what you said an hour ago?" Of course it was, but like Groundhog Day they seemed never to figure it out, reliving the same routine at every meeting.



*The secret self-assurance of an intelligent woman*

awareness of same. It is a simple casual portrait, but the look on her face says it all.

The expression is a self-confident, assured, I-know-something-you-don't-know look. The secret she's smiling about is, of course, that intellectually she had long since left her peers in the dust. It is a private look of supreme confidence bordering on intellectual arrogance—except that the young girl in that photo didn't have a

## Susie's Garden

mean or vain bone in her body. Although I did not know her at that young age I treasure that photograph as much as any I personally took because of what it says about her character to those who know her well enough to decode it.

It is also the first recorded incidence in my possession of her enigmatic Mona Lisa smile.

She was the smartest woman I've ever known. I can hardly remember a single instance where she was wrong about anything. Her many interlinked financial spreadsheets are still in use today by the organization she developed them for. She had a habit of leaping to the conclusion for any problem, skipping all the steps in between. It was a constant delight to engage in tests of knowledge and understanding with her, and I suspect that our good-natured contests keep both of us sharp.

It certainly kept us entertained. Our daughter sometimes thought we were arguing during these sessions. But we weren't; we were having a grand old time exercising our debating skills and exhibiting our knowledge and understanding. Our regard for one another was all



*Sun-lit, wind-blown, the Susie smile – perfection!*

the healthier for it.

## Home, Cat, Expectant Mother



*...she had been a fiancée, a young wife,  
and a mother, and she had discovered  
that these words were far too small  
ever to contain the experience.*

— Kim Edwards



ventually we could afford a house of our own, so we began looking for a site. Our search turned up a well-placed development just outside town, convenient for the commute to work. There were only a couple of lots still undeveloped, none of them particularly desirable. But this would put us a little closer to our place of employment so we bought the best of the remaining lots. It wasn't perfect, being shaped more like an irregular trapezoid than a rectangle, but it would do. We debated what to build within our budget and in keeping with the style of the neighborhood.

We decided on a simple one-story, three-bedroom brick rambler with basement. Susan drew up plans on graph paper and we began looking for a builder. She had been meticulous in her planning and the house went up according to her plan with only trivial modifications. We moved in while she was pregnant with our first child, a daughter.

Together, we kept house, went to work and spent many a happy weekend with Susan's grandparents, often timed for those Sunday

chicken dinner extravaganzas. Susan matured from a bright and lovely newly-wed into a caring mother, a diligent wife and housekeeper and a competent and accomplished professional.

She also became a budding gardener, an avocation that she came to love most of all, accumulating a whole library of books and a vast store of knowledge as well as a varied and well-tended flower garden. But that came later, at our second house. Her gardening was just getting started. There were builder shrubs in front of the house, blooming forsythia along the driveway and a profusion of marigolds along the back of the house. Inside, she began accumulating cutting in the kitchen window and a few indoor plants scattered around. Over the years these would grow to fill every window that had sun exposure. Any time there was trouble she would call her grandmother for a



*Pregnant and pretty in pink*

consultation. Mema, whose house had a separate sun room devoted to plants, always came to the rescue.

We lived in our brick rambler for five years, from 1973 to 1978, each endpoint marking not only a new house but also a new child. Many significant milestones took place in those years. Besides our first child and our first house, we both reached journeyman status in our professions.



In the natural course of Susan's first pregnancy, she eventually had to take leave from work due to fatigue and the other difficulties that expectant mothers are heir to. Which put her at home alone all day, every day. Here occurred another of those incidents that left Susan

## Susie's Garden

hurt and disappointed. I had learned to play tennis in college, and it became a lifelong sport for me—I still play even now. We had a regular foursome from work who played as often as possible. One day, one of the guys called and suggested we leave early and hit the courts.

I was always ready, so off we went home to change and pick up our gear. I walked in the house to find Susan resting in our living room. I greeted her as I breezed through the house, soon to say goodbye as I left with racquet and shorts.

It wasn't until years later that she confessed how disappointed she felt that day. When the car pulled up in the driveway and I came in,



*Busy Susan rakes fall leaves*

she felt a surge of joy that I had taken time off work to come home and be with her. She was hurt and dejected when she realized she was to be ignored, although she said nothing to me until years afterward.

Had she said something at the time I would gladly have come home early every day, just to be with her. But, as an only child, with both a military father and later a military stepfather, she was used to being left to her own devices. As a

result, she learned to cope by becoming self-reliant and remaining silent rather than voicing her feelings and disappointments.

I only learned this much later in our marriage, a source of regret because it explained much of how she approached life and how she interacted with people, even with me. In the early days, I had not yet learned to pick up the subtle clues in her closely held moods and expressions that I later did. Had I been able to read those cues, or if she had been better equipped by temperament to express her thoughts and emotions more freely, much of the hurt feelings and disappointment she experienced in the early years would have been avoided.

It was a classic case of, "if I knew then what I know now." She would never talk about feelings or emotions. To her, such talk was weakness and psycho-babble. But the needs were there nonetheless, however deeply buried.



During our stay there, the remnant of Hurricane Agnes blew through, downing power lines and dumped untold quantities of rain in our area. We were hard hit by the power outage; we had a sump pump in our basement, but with no power the basement flooded, unnoticed initially. Many valuable papers and books stored in the basement were lost as well as records the existence of which I don't even remember. Thankfully, this took place soon after we moved in, before our daughter was born, because there was no power for the refrigerator or stove. We bought an ice chest and were able to keep a supply on hand thanks to the fact that our town had a commercial ice house.



While in our first house, Susan sallied forth to get our first cat, a ginger tabby kitten plucked from a rabbit hutch out in the rural farmland east of town. With a child on the way, Tigger from Winnie the Pooh was a natural name. Tigger came into a neighborhood with a number of established adult cats already in residence. His early

## Susie's Garden

neglected upbringing left him at a competitive disadvantage vs the established toms in his new neighborhood, and he became devoted to us rather than venturing forth nightly where he might have to do battle with the older and more mature males.

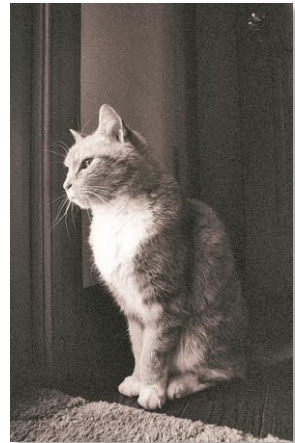
Susan finally had a cat. Slowly the blank spots in her expressed love of “daisies, daffodils and kitty cats” were being filled in. Over time, Tigger became a cat of dignity and elegance, always a well-behaved model citizen—the elder statesman of our subsequent feline family.

This was the first inkling I had of what was to be a lifelong habit. Susan loved animals, both domestic and wild, and showered them with affection, food, and care. More cats would come later, as well as a flower garden. Eventually the back yard of our second home, situated in a deep wood, would be the scene of a virtual animal buffet. Everybody got a meal, even the resident box turtles.



Robert Frost wrote that "good fences make good neighbors. This presumes that neighbors know that they should survey their property lines before installation. In our middle-class neighborhood there were plenty of families with children, and people went for chain link fences around their back yards as a cost-effective way to create enclosed play areas and to keep their pets in and other pets out. We followed suit when our daughter came along. However, the neighbor to the right of us already had a fence so we simply had to tie into it in the back corner of our yards.

We had our lot surveyed in preparation for installation, the result of which was that we discovered that the neighbors' fence was significantly over on our side. It wandered steadily away from the true property line the further back it went from the common corner point at the street. By the time it reached the mutual back of our properties their final corner post was fully ten feet on our side. It turned out that the owner had done the



*Tigger, the orange tabby*

install himself and had not bothered with a survey.

We asked him to move his fence, and he did so, once again doing all the digging and reinstalling himself. It was a case where his failing to spend money on a survey cost him a lot of weekends and, no doubt, a few blisters along the way. His wife, however, wasn't so agreeable. She thought we should just let it be—cede the property to them—and said so quite vocally. But we had the survey and if we had let it go, that land would have become theirs, by right of possession, if not by right of law. She hadn't been the friendliest neighbor before, but after this incident she was positively frosty.



Then there's the notorious incident of the back yard car park, known and retold every time the family gathers to swap lies about the good old days. Susan was home one afternoon and happened to look out the back window. There sat the Firebird, behind the house rather



than in the driveway at the side of the house.

I came in by the back door rather than the front, and she looked at me quizzically.

"Why is the car in the back yard?"

*Susan commandeers Firebird for shopping spree, smiles gleefully at stranded husband*

A natural question under the

circumstances, but I only mumbled a vague answer and proceeded to a window on the front side of the house where I watched surreptitiously from behind a curtain, monitoring the street unobtrusively. After watching for some time, I was able to conclude that Operation Backyard had succeeded. Family knows why, but it might be best if the casual reader is left to imagine. Case closed.

Perhaps it would not be amiss to add that growing up poor in the rural South in the 1950s, one is imbued with a certain set of cultural



*Susan loved Christmas; in later years our home became a Christmas fairyland*

norms—and perhaps a bit of inheritance as well. In my case, I had a father who, family legend has it, was at one time a bootlegger. (The story is probably apocryphal; most such stories were at the time.) He did run for local sheriff but lost. There was an uncle who drove dirt track modified stockers, cars prepared in my grandfather's car repair garage and raced on Sunday afternoons on local tracks.

Whatever I was—including the maverick streak that may have caught Susan's attention—I came by it naturally.



When a young child came along decorating for Christmas became a must. We started out with real trees, but that practice could have proved tragic. One year we made the mistake of picking a dried prune of a tree; you could hear needles pattering down on gifts every time someone walked across the floor. It was too late for the water pan in the stand to help. It was a terrible fire hazard, and we were very

## Susie's Garden

selective with real ones after that—until we finally bought an artificial tree.

Here began Susan's love of decorating for Christmas, with a few odds and ends scattered around the house in addition to the tree. We will delve into Susan's Christmas obsession when narration moves to our next house.

When we began a new house, selling the rambler in the process, we had a built-in advantage—the wife of one of our carpool members was a real estate agent. She immediately got us an offer for full asking price, but the gentleman wanted us to vacate immediately. We waited and still got a good offer. We bid goodbye to our first home and moved a few blocks away to a house and situation we had long dreamed of.

## *We Acquire a Daughter*



*Your children will become what you are,  
so be what you want them to be.*

—David Bly

*A son's a son 'til he takes a wife,  
But a daughter's a daughter for life.*

— Anonymous folk wisdom



he night our daughter was born I came home from tennis (notice the trend here?) to find Susan soaking in the bath tub. She looked up as I came into the bathroom, flashed a welcoming smile at me and wryly pointed out the obvious with as much bright and pert nonchalance as a nine months pregnant woman in labor can muster,

"I think it's time to go to the hospital."

She already had a bag packed, so we grabbed it and I helped her waddle to the car, me still clad in tennis shorts. She was a trooper all the way, and hospital staff responded promptly, rushing her into a room for prep. Once they wheeled her into the delivery theater I found a seat in the waiting area.

There was one other expectant father present, a young fellow who

couldn't have been more than 22 or so. We talked a bit while we waited, and he confessed to a bit of impatience. "I hope this doesn't take long. I have a date with her sister once the baby comes." I of course said nothing, but I couldn't help but feel sympathy for his wife as well as the newborn child she was bringing into the world. How does a budding family survive such an individual?



*Newborn daughter, one day old*

Labor lasted a while, and our infant daughter was born in the early morning hours. I was allowed a brief visit with both of them and then shooed out so Susan could finally get some rest. I showed up at the hospital the next morning with a bouquet of flowers and a camera. She asked me to put the flowers in water and then tolerated a few brief photos of her in bed.

Buoyed up with happiness for the occasion, and grateful that both had come through safely, I nevertheless couldn't help noticing that she was not her usual self. In the photos taken that morning, of Susan in her hospital bed, one can detect a restrained expression, not quite melancholy but not her usual jaunty air either. What it really meant I did not understand at the time, but it did worry me. What if she was regretting becoming a new mother? I had no idea how we would go forward if that were true.



*Contemplative after giving birth*

Later, I found out about the phenomenon called postpartum blues. Experts say

Later, I found out about the phenomenon called postpartum blues. Experts say

it is a "mild and short-term mood disorder that results from pregnancy." Moreover, "Postpartum blues can set in immediately after giving birth. Fortunately for most, it is usually a temporary disorder." Her drooping spirits on the day were certainly consistent with this condition. I do know that it took a few days rest and a lot of sleep before she bounced back.

In retrospect, as both a husband and a new father, albeit a young and naive one, I wish I had been better prepared to help her banish whatever inner demons were dragging her down in that moment. Both of our mothers were out of state so we had to struggle through



*Much needed rest*

it by ourselves. Her grandmother, Mema, proved a great help.

That night Susan and I visited the neo-natal nursery to see our daughter and, in my case, to hold her for the first time. A nurse brought her out,

and I reached out to touch her tiny, delicate little hand. She immediately grasped my pinkie finger and held on tight. This was the moment when I truly became a father. I bonded with that little pink waif that night with as deep and unbreakable a bond as with Susan. The nurse, of course, pooh-poohed the whole thing as a natural instinctive infant reaction. I knew better.

Susan spent the first few days after discharge at Mema's, an old-school country saint of a woman who had cared for many infants in her time. She took superb care of mother and newborn. Susan soon bounced back from her blues, and gradually her natural *joie de vivre* reemerged. I have a photograph of Susan sitting on one of our kitchen bar stools and holding our daughter's head in her hand. They are staring at each other intently.

No one knows what an infant sees, although I suspect nature provides

## Susie's Garden

an imprinting mechanism for such occasions. Susan on the other hand, seemed lost in contemplation. I never asked her about that photo, but my guess would be that she was marveling at the miracle of the new life she held—and perhaps wondering what life changes it augured. In any case, this photo and the companion closeup of the baby's head in her hands, her head tiny in comparison to Susan's own small hands, are among the most treasured of all the photographs I've ever taken.



Notwithstanding her early and brief bout of flagging spirits, Susan turned out to be a wonderful mother. She dressed our daughter, changed her, bathed her, fed her, read her stories, rocked her to sleep, got up in the night with her and, most importantly of all, loved her



and cared for her expertly. Meanwhile, I was over the Moon with pride and joy over the arrival of this beautiful, tiny daughter person.



I used to tease Susan that she changed diapers whenever they got wrinkled. But she was also capable of tough love. As our daughter says to this day, if she wanted something she might be able to convince Dad. But when Mom said *no*, that was the end. I happened to catch one such tough-love look in a photograph, and it is a classic.

*New mother, tiny miracle*

Our five years in that first house marked many changes for us. With a new daughter, we were now a family. Together, we kept house, took loving care of our precious daughter, went to work and spent many a happy weekend with her grandparents. Susan grew from a bright and

lovely young newly-wed into a mature woman.

Since we were the first of the next generation on either side of our families to produce a child, the new addition became the object of attention from all the relatives. Susan's mother came to visit and help out. My brothers came to visit. My mother and grandmother, the latter by now an aged and infirm invalid, came to visit. Susan's oldest cousin, with whom she had been playmates as a child, came to visit. Even Susan's grandfather got in the act. It is touching but also a bit comical to see the expressions on the faces of those of our generation when the little bundle was thrust into their arms.



After he was married, my brother Andy brought his new bride, Carolyn for a visit. Just starting out, they had to pinch pennies and budgeted just enough for gas to and from their out-of-state home. Unfortunately, they fell afoul of a speed trap on one of the Interstate highways in the rural part of the state. Unbeknownst to them, the town they passed was a notorious speed trap—a problem still endemic in the rural South at the time—and they must have looked like easy marks.

It was either pay the ticket on the spot with a local magistrate who was always available at any hour, day or



*When I say no, I mean NO!*

night—a sure sign of local government corruption—or return for a court date. The latter being untenable, they paid, with the last of their cash. Their visit was a pleasure for all of us, but when it was time for them to leave, they confessed that they didn't have enough money for gas on the way home. Susan made sure they could make it all the way back. When they drove past the offending strip of Interstate on the

way home, they made sure that the local money-grubbers would not profit at their expense.



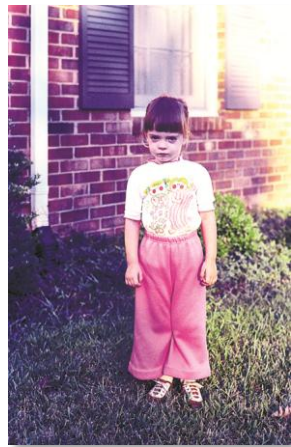
When our daughter was about ten years old, we took our first real vacation together. I booked a villa at Kiawah Island near Charleston South Carolina, and we went for a week of fun, relaxation, good dining and sightseeing. We visited the Battery, Patriot Point, Fort Moultrie, and a host of well curated historical plantations. I played tennis with another guest from Switzerland and Susan concentrated on the wide variety of flowers and plants that grew in the area.



*Daughter announces disapproval*

Before Charleston, our destinations had been the Shenandoah Mountains and Colonial Williamsburg, the latter of which began a lifelong love of colonial history & architecture. That love found expression later, in our second house.

In that first house, the birthday girl had her first birthday party, we went to our first circus, and she entered kindergarten. Since we both worked it was necessary to find a sitter for the weekdays. We found a woman nearby who was up for the task, and we dropped her off each morning. The woman had a daughter, a lively and funny young girl, with whom our daughter bonded as she might have with an older sister. Her beseeching looks of unspoken anxiety on the day she entered kindergarten were priceless, and I'm so glad I preserved them.



*I don't want to go*



One day she and I were driving to town, just the two of us. She was perhaps three or four, at an age where everything she did was indescribably cute. She was smart, she was sassy and she had a mind of her own. She knew how to wrap Dad around that little pinkie finger from the newborn nursery, and she was, from birth, simply a beautiful child. In later years, when I would show pictures of her and



*Mommy, must I go to kindergarten?*

her mother people would instantly recognize the resemblance. “She looks just like her mother.” Clearly inheritance was at work.

To say that I was over the moon with this captivating little creature would be an understatement. As a father, I adored her, and I couldn't keep it a secret. One day we were driving to town together, just the two of us in the car. Looking at her, I blurted out, “You are perfect just the way you are. I wish you never had to change.”



*Discerning toddler appropriates Mom's glasses for fashion accessory*

This backfired spectacularly. She clouded up and immediately began to wail, “I don't want to change, I don't want to change.” It was all I could do to repair the damage. But what I said about her being perfect was true. Like her

## Susie's Garden

mother, she had inherited a high-spirited mind of her own and she stood up for what she wanted. Fortunately for us, her wants were never unreasonable and we were able to give her, I believe, a happy childhood, free from the miseries that had plagued both of her parents growing up. Susan and I took great pride in that fact.



*Fearless daughter goes flying*

a gerbil, a hamster, a fish tank and a dog. There was also a parrot. I drew the line at snakes. She was a hyperactive mirror of her mother, smiling, laughing, romping through the house with glee.

We played games that she adored. In the first, she would stand on our kitchen counter and dive off into my arms. She was utterly



*Four generations of lovely ladies*

## Susie's Garden

fearless and completely trusting, and she jumped and dove without fear. For the second—and while she was small enough for it to work—I would grasp both legs above her knees and swing her back and forth between my legs. This she also loved, cackling with delight with each swing. I sometimes wonder if that reckless abandon while being freed from the bonds of gravity paved the way for the love she later developed for horses.



*Two industrious ladies prepare dinner*

## Susie's Garden

# *There's No Fear Like Parents'* *Fear*



*“It wasn’t until I had children of my own,  
That I realized I could never love my parents  
As much as they love me.”*  
— Quote from a young man  
after fathering a child of his own



ew parents quickly learn what it is to fear for the safety of a child. Most of parenting is concerned with the mundane, making sure the child is fed, clothed, provided with a secure environment where it can play, learn and prosper. But children can get themselves into trouble at any time—scrapes, cuts, bruises, even the occasional broken bone as the child gets older. These are par for the course and parents learn to tamp down concern. For most of childhood routine bumps and bruises heal quickly and can even serve as learning experiences if not too serious.

But every so often there is the exception. Our first bout of real parental anxiety occurred while we were still at our first home, and it was a parents' nightmare that brought both of us to the brink. Our daughter developed a lump on the side of her jaw, a bulge that would

not go away. Our pediatrician realized that she needed specialist help so he referred us to a children's hospital. At that point worry turned to full blown terror. What if it was cancer? Would she be taken from us? How could a child so young, so lively, so cute and so endearing be struck low at her age?

Our doctor made an appointment for us and at the allotted time we reported to the hospital. The staff was wonderful—professional and sympathetic. A doctor came to look at her, and our daughter was scheduled for surgery that afternoon. As she lay on her hospital bed, awaiting transport to the operating theater, she stuck her thumb in her mouth, a habit she had formed at an early age. I always fussed at her but persuasion proved ineffective in stopping the habit—she was just going to have to outgrow it.

She was quite worried now, of course; she was in a strange place and people were poking her and talking hospital stuff, and her parents were being extra nice and soothing to her rather than scolding her, the latter a frequent occurrence for such a lively child. She looked up at me with big luminous eyes.



*Kitchen sink hair wash*

"Daddy, why aren't you telling me to stop sucking my thumb?"

Overcome by the question, Susan turned away. I tried to reassure her; I don't remember what I said, but it was something along

the lines of, "We're in a strange place, and it's OK just this once if it makes you feel better." The answer satisfied her and she relaxed.

She was soon thereafter taken to surgery. A couple of tense hours later the surgeon returned. "We've removed the lump and performed a biopsy. It isn't cancer. It's cat scratch fever. She's going be

fine.” The relief at these words flooded through us in gratified waves.



At about six or seven years of age our daughter developed a love of horses, a love she still carries today. We enrolled her in lessons at the area's most prominent equestrian center. She loved being on horseback, in fact she loved everything about horses, even the mundane chores. Did our toddler gymnastic games play a role in her willingness to sit in the saddle, mounted on a half-ton animal that could run, jump and buck? I don't know, but it is an intriguing thought.

But from a parent's perspective, with horses comes danger. After all, they can and do run, jump and buck. As a rider, one can be evicted into free fall at any moment and it is a long way to the ground. As a result, being a parent of a budding equestrian is to live with constant fear that something terrible will happen.

There is one event that is still burned into my mind. This happened later, when she as a teenager began to consider a horse of her own.

She had brought in a horse for evaluation, and she decided to take it for a trail ride to see how it moved and responded to rider commands. So off we went, with me jogging along as a spotter in case something out of the ordinary happened. All went well for a while, and it was relaxing to be in the woods, close to nature. Then, horse and rider came to a small stream, hardly more than a depression in the woods and no more than inches wide.

Suddenly the horse, perfectly well behaved up until this point, bolted when asked to cross this imagined mighty torrent. As the beast caromed through the woods I watched in paralyzed horror as our precious daughter leaned forward and grabbed its mane for security, hanging on for



*Beware the barn!*

dear life. As the horse pounded off into the distance, she slowly began to tilt to one side. She gradually rotated around the horse's neck until she was hanging upside down underneath.

Then she let go. Thankfully the horse jumped over her. Off it went at a gallop in the direction of the barn.

Frozen in terror up until this point, I took off at a sprint to see if she was injured. But she was up and running after that horse so fast I



couldn't overtake her before she got to the barn. When I arrived, she was pummeling the horse mightily with her balled-up fists and reviling it vehemently in language I had never heard from her. She was a bit bruised but other than injured dignity that was

all. In later years we could laugh at the incident, but at the time I understood fully what it was like as a parent to fear for a child.

Horses are expensive and they are dangerous. Not only are the good ones very costly to purchase but they need food, exercise, grooming and veterinary care. They require significant real estate and



*New equestrian tacks up for a lesson*

facilities for pasturing, exercising and stabling. Worse, they can do themselves considerable bodily harm by accident—sometimes just by existing it often seems—adding more expense.

But there are benefits, and for those who love horses they outweigh the negatives. First, riding a horse requires skill, courage and the ability to control a half-ton plus animal. For young girls, and boys too, mucking out stalls, carrying bales of hay or bags of feed, drawing buckets of water, grooming and caring for horses and becoming familiar enough with horse behavior and condition to recognize signs indicating that a vet should be called doesn't leave much spare time to get into mischief.

Our daughter did all these things long before we laid down cash for a horse of her own and she did them well, becoming an expert in horse care in the bargain.

By her diligence, hard work and dedication she justified owning her own horse. Now, decades later she's still at it, and has even gotten into horse breeding. As a parent, Susan and I took pride in our belief that we



*Working off the cost of barn board*

helped our daughter chart a responsible course through her early years, and I think the result confirms the truth of that.



There were other instances, of course. No child grows up without a few scrapes and bruises. And no child, even after the nest is flown, is truly beyond being a source of anxiety for a parent.

One memory in particular stands out. Our daughter did well enough academically in college to earn a full-ride graduate fellowship at a prestigious national university. We rented a trailer to transport her

## Susie's Garden

possessions hundreds of miles to her new temporary home, an apartment near campus. After unpacking, it was time to say goodbye. Watching her as we departed, leaving her in a place far beyond our ability to provide immediate assistance should it be needed, was, up until that moment, the most difficult thing we had ever done.

Thankfully, she called frequently, just to talk or sometimes to seek encouragement from mom or dad when homesickness struck. We made the long drive to visit her as often as we could manage. I even once had a business trip to a city nearby, allowing me to spend time with her.



*Mother and daughter bond through shopping*

The trip itself demonstrated that those in a position of influence must always be on their guard. My role was to review a new technology being developed by the company I visited. During my visit, their project manager took me aside and confided that she knew that

my daughter was in school nearby and that if her company could do anything to help her, they would be glad to do so.

This was, of course, an instant danger sign. I gently reminded the lady that such things were not appropriate and the matter was dropped. When I got back to my own office, I asked that someone else take the lead with respect to that company.

Our daughter also come home to visit as often as school schedule allowed. She was an especially welcome addition to our summer vacations, and in that way, we maintained close contact despite the miles in between. All the while, she was forming new friendships and exploring new activities in her new temporary home.

Then she disappeared. Or so we thought.



After exchanging regular calls with her throughout her sojourn away from us, one week we noticed that there had been no calls for an unusually long time. We tried calling her apartment, with no effect. The anxiety level began to rise. We had no alternative number for her, but we did know her professor's name and his department was listed in the school directory. We called the department secretary first, but she had no idea where our daughter was. We tried her professor. He was a bit nonplussed by the call but had no idea either.

An empty, helpless feeling was growing for both Susan and I. We realized we had absolutely no control over the situation and no way to regain it. Her university was in a large city, and we could image all manner of bad things overtaking her. By this time, we were contemplating a call to the local police department to report her as a missing person.



*Wild pony investigates admirer*

Then, just as anxiety was becoming intolerable, she called. It turned out that on a lark she had flown to Florida to spend time relaxing with

## Susie's Garden

a friend, forgetting to tell us where she had gone. The panicked ruckus we had caused at her university had prompted another friend who knew where she had gone to call her with the news of her parents' wild search. It all ended well, but we asked her to please let us know next time she decided to go AWOL.

*Part II — A Home and a  
Family*



## Susie's Garden

## *A House on a Hill*



*For we must consider that we shall be  
As a city that is set on a hill. . .  
Therefore, let us choose life,  
That we and our seed may live. . .  
— John Winthrop, 1630*



e had loved the unique architectural styles of Colonial Williamsburg ever since our first visit, in the early days of our marriage. The style we liked best was the "story and a half" look, a two-floor house with a high-pitched roof and



*Palmer House kitchen—our inspiration*

narrow dormers across the front. We didn't have the wherewithal to start out that way, hence the one-story rambler, nor did we have a suitable place to build. But we never lost sight of that goal. Finally, in

1978 we got a break.

Our absolute favorite subdivision, an eclectic upscale enclave on our side of town convenient to our drive to work, did not have sewer connections and all the lots that could handle sanitation via drain fields already houses on them. But, one day in 1978, as we were taking our periodic troll through that neighborhood on the way home from work, we discovered new houses on a street that hitherto had been devoid of development.

To our good fortune, the developer had added sewer connections on that street. And there were a few lots left, large in size, almost an acre each, and covered with trees. We immediately picked out the best of the bunch, up on a hill, with good drainage and no possibility of basement flooding. Buying that lot became our top priority. We



*Under construction at last!*

managed to pull it off by borrowing the down payment from my life insurance policy, some of the best money we ever spent because, to use the overworked cliché, it let us build our dream home, a home we have lived in ever since, and

the home to which Susan returned for the last time, for one final longing gaze at her garden.

With that milestone accomplished, we began discussing plans, and Susan got busy again with her graph paper and pencil. We looked at many floor plans but, in the end, we drew up our own. What emerged was a clean layout with large rooms arrayed around a central entrance hall. The main house was symmetrical from the exterior, with the exception of a small wing added on the left off the kitchen, for storage and utilities. Inside, there were no seldom-used rooms other than our formal dining room—but then with a classic colonial

## Susie's Garden

structure as our goal the house could hardly have done without that. In our previous house we had the typical living room in the front, but we actually spent all our time in our combination kitchen and den in the back of the house. In this plan, the 30-foot front-to-back living room was for living—and it worked out exactly that way.

For the exterior, we picked a mix of colonial beaded siding and brick. The house we built was inspired by the Palmer House kitchen dependency in Colonial Williamsburg (see photo previous page).

It had siding on the front and brick around the sides and back. We called this exterior “reverse snob appeal” (i.e. expensive) to distinguish it from the oft-used cost savings expedient of bricking the front and applying less expensive siding to sides and back. We chose Colonial Williamsburg paint colors inside and out. The exterior, in particular, received a striking coat of Pitt-Dixon Caramel, to us an almost unique color. It is now out of production, but fortunately we had saved a paint chip brochure, and when it came time to repaint, we were able to obtain a close color match mixed from the sample.



*Small tree at driveway turn saved our furniture*

Perhaps the only down side was that there were only three bedrooms. Most houses of this size have four. But the result was ample rooms with plenty of floor space in each. In addition to the front-to-back living room layout the master bedroom also extended from street view to backyard overlook. The other two bedrooms, intended for our children, were also ample. The dining room was formal, and there was also a breakfast room. We understood that our choice might make the house a bit more difficult to sell, but we didn't build it to sell decades down the road; we built it to live in. And, live in it we did, for nearly five decades before Susan was taken from us.

Knowing the importance of getting it right, we employed an architectural firm to draw up builder's blueprints. The result was a classic Williamsburg style, with five dormers on the steep front side

## Susie's Garden

second story roof and a side entrance front porch with Chippendale rail showing to the street. There were architectural tricks that enhanced the street view. The first-floor rooms were framed with full eight-foot studs rather than the shorter ones that counted on the floor and ceiling caps to make up eight feet. This added four inches to room height. Also, the plan called for a three-foot second floor knee wall on the front side. The front side roof rafters rested on this short wall, raising the apparent front facade so that from the outside the house appeared to have ten-foot ceilings. This also gave us more second floor space.

We selected a builder, the only one whose bid we could afford, and construction began. We haunted the site every day after work and on weekends. Susan and I scrambled all over the structure as it was framed out, visualizing what the final result might look like inside. Gradually the house took shape, and one day in November it was finally complete. We were ready to move in!



We found a mover, and our paltry worldly goods were packed into a big box truck for transport over Thanksgiving weekend. Unfortunately for us, it had rained for days prior to the move. The builder had laid down gravel for our circular driveway but the ground was saturated, and although the driveway itself held firm—barely—everything else was soft mud.

The mover got his truck up the hill okay, and made the turn to the front of the house in order to begin unloading. But then, things went awry, bringing the potential for complete catastrophe. Hoping to park his truck at a bit of an angle in order to better set himself up for unloading, he decided to pull forward and back up to our entrance sidewalk at the best angle he could manage. In doing so, his front driver's side wheel got off the gravel, and he was soon stuck in the mud. Worse, his cab was at the beginning of a downhill right angle turn so he had little wiggle room to pull forward to go around and try again—



*Scar, 47 years later*

the truck was difficult to maneuver from his position, especially given the loss of traction in the mud.

And then the truck began to tilt as his front wheel started to sink in the mud.



*A family walk in the snow*

Susan and I watched in horror. There, in that tilted truck, was everything we owned. The driver began trying to back up and go forward, hoping to rock the truck in order to free himself, but his drive wheels were spinning from lack of traction. The cargo box continued to lean until eventually it came to rest against a little tree, hardly more than a sapling, in the inside of that sharp downhill turn (photo previous page). If that tree gave way, all was lost. Susan couldn't stand to watch; she retreated into the house in panic.

I watched for a few moments and then went inside to check on her. She was standing at the kitchen sink, looking out the window at a very muddy back yard and smoking a cigarette, her hands trembling as she did so. I was hardly less agitated, but I tried to comfort and reassure her as best I could—to no avail. After soothing her for a moment, reassurance I didn't feel any more than she did, I went back outside to keep watch again. Gradually, by a miracle and some expert

## Susie's Garden

maneuvering the driver managed to extricate himself, go downhill and come around to try again. This time he made no mistake.

From that point, unloading proceeded smoothly, and the house gradually filled with furniture and packing boxes. At the end of a very long and anxiety-filled day, we were finally in our long imagined Colonial Williamsburg dream home. That brave little tree had saved all our worldly goods.

As for the tree, the experience must have stunted its growth because it is still a very small tree 47 years later, and its bark still bears the scar of that day's ordeal.

But we were safely in at last. Now it was time to go about making our new house into a home.



*Garage, paved driveway, flower garden, new paint, 47 years later*

## *A Potpourri of Life with Susan*



*"You are the finest, loveliest, tenderest,  
and most beautiful person I have ever known  
—and even that is an understatement."*

— F. Scott Fitzgerald

*"If I had a flower for every time I thought of you,  
I could walk in my garden forever."*

— Alfred Lord Tennyson



Life is never a bed of roses, nor are times always good. But those of us who try to enjoy life take care of what has to be done and then get on with getting the most out of what we have. Like everyone else Susan and I had to struggle with life's share of unexpected vicissitudes and travails, childhood illnesses, grouchy moods (that was mostly me), petty annoyances (I left dishes in the sink rather than putting them in the dishwasher, she never turned off a light when she left the room!) and home ownership aggravations (that first winter we were introduced to a rather unpleasant phenomenon called "ice damming."<sup>1</sup>) But as her mother said,

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<sup>1</sup> Ice damming is a buildup of ice at the edge of a sloped roof, formed when melting snow flows down and refreezes at the eaves, preventing proper drainage. This can lead to water backing up under shingles and causing leaks and damage to the interior of a building.

through it all we laughed a lot.

Susan made it easy. She still had a bit of the little girl in her and she loved to tease, to play harmless little pranks. For instance, I disliked cucumbers intensely so she always put a tiny sliver in my salads. I could *smell* that sucker, but it was impossible to find amongst all the other salad fixings—until I bit into it.

To her friends, Susan was “just Susie”—no pretense, no false facade, no phony airs; just Susie. What you saw was what you got—authentic. Everyone who knew her remarked on her laugh—it was always ready to emerge and sometimes she laughed so hard she would almost cry. But the thing I see most clearly as I go back through old photographs for this narrative is her smile. I noticed it from the first time we met and it was always there. Sometimes there was a bit of the impish devil in it—to match the sparkle in her eyes. Rather like ‘the cat that ate the canary.’

She was blessed with a temperament that was never negative. She never complained no matter the provocation; she never worried about what *might* happen, only what did; she never shirked what had to be done, she just went about doing it without comment or expectation of credit. In all things she was highly competent, organized and efficient at whatever she did. But above all else, she enjoyed life—her sense of humor and light-hearted mischievousness sustained us. Because she enjoyed life, I enjoyed life with her. Indeed, for me, she made life possible.

## *Vignettes from a Shared Journey*

Susan was not emotionally effusive, those two early ring incidences notwithstanding. She believed that words did not substitute for deeds. For the greater part of our marriage her way of showing love was to do things for me that she knew I liked, to offer me first pick on the choicest items, to cook two meals so we could each enjoy what we liked when those two didn't coincide, to do things my way rather than hers if she thought it mattered to me. She usually deferred to me unless she thought I was making a serious mistake about something. It was not that she never expressed love explicitly

but rather that words were reserved for special occasions and to her thereby made more meaningful. Otherwise, deeds counted for all.

The effect she had on me was the opposite. Although introverted and reserved when I was young, once I fell in love with her, I couldn't hold back. I told her how I felt about her frequently and sincerely. I became quite talkative, sometimes so much so that she would give me a look of exasperation. For all of that, we worked collaboratively as partners in life on everything and all decisions were joint when it came to a final choice.

A prime example is the way we went about planning our home renovation and picking out new light and plumbing fixtures, countertops, cabinets, appliances, shower stall and a host of other renewal items. We discussed every possibility before sallying forth to look at alternatives. In most, indeed almost all cases, the final choices were hers. She simply had a better sense of fashion and décor than I did.



*The smile that says, watch out—  
a gotcha coming your way!*

The renovation took place over a few years and several contract segments. Fortunately, we had a patient contractor because we made several contract modifications as the work proceeded, usually because we realized that we hadn't thought of something. When it was all over, we practically had a new house—and no wonder, for the renovations cost more than the house itself. Not surprising; forty years of currency inflation had driven costs sky high.



Throughout our marriage, Susan's sense of mischief could emerge at any time. When our grandson came along, he spent many hours and

days with us while his mom and dad did other things. On such occasions he would often sit in my lap in my recliner while he played games on his tablet and I watched TV or read. By that time, I had developed a habit of inadvertently napping for a short period. One day, Susan, ever observant, could not help capturing the moment with one of my cameras. She liked the result so much that she insisted that I print and frame it.

Today, that photos, along with dozens of other family photographs, many of them older than either of us, adorn the walls of our breakfast room. This was her idea too. She wanted to be surrounded by our families, and the walls of that room are almost completely covered with photographs. At her request we added photographs of all our pets. Having often enjoyed photographs of backyard birds that I had collected over the years, she asked me to fill a few of the remaining vacant spaces with small bird portraits.

On another occasion, only a few years ago, during a visit to the Shenandoah Mountains for the fall colors, she asked me to pose with my camera while she made a photograph of me. This was another example of her way of expressing love. We set the pose up and, with a second camera, she composed and made the photograph she wanted.



She was not immune to pique at things I did, even letting out some unladylike utterances on occasion. Sometimes these came back to me second hand. One such instance occurred while I was on the way home from a business meeting out-of-state. It was getting dark, and I decided to exit the Interstate and find a fast-food restaurant for a snack before proceeding on home. Having make my choice and polished off a burger, I discovered that I had locked my keys in the car.

Here I was, a hundred miles from home, late at night, with no solution to a problem of my own creation. Not knowing anything else to do, I called Susan and asked her to bring the spare keys to my location. She agreed without comment. Only later did our daughter relate to me the blue streak of commentary she unleashed when she

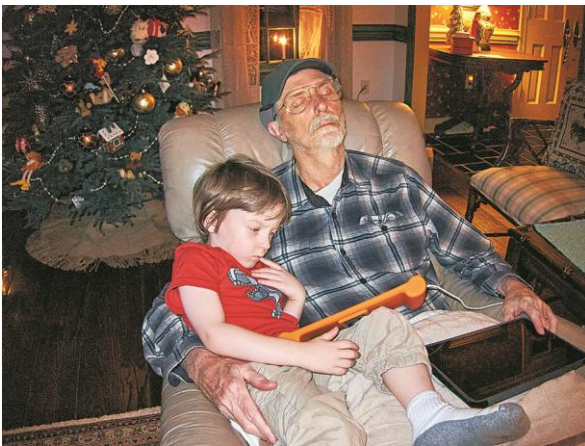
hung up.

Fortunately, someone saw my plight and suggested I call the local police, commenting that they would be able to get into the car. I did so and a very nice gendarme used a special tool to release the lock so I could get in. The keys having been rescued, I called Susan back to let her know that I didn't need her after all. She was hardly mollified by the reprieve, and for weeks and months afterward I was treated to a recitation of this incident to friends and relatives.

There is a common cliché stating that 'what goes around comes around.' Eventually, the shoe landed on the other foot. This time, it was she who called while on the road. She had been to a meeting in the city and on the way home she had a flat tire on the Interstate bypass. She asked me to come change the tire and rescue her.

I suggested that if she wanted rescue immediately, she could call our car insurance company's roadside assistance hot line and arrange for a local company to deal with the tire. There was a long pause, and then in a small, meek, quavering voice, she responded, "OK. . ." The female voice, in that tone of obvious distress, is irresistible to any

male with a heart. Men have performed impossible feats under its command. I quickly asked, "Would you rather I come down and changed it for you?" The instant and much relieved response was,



*Susie strikes again; Grandpa snoozes, grandson peruses*

"Yes!"

She gave me her location and I told her, "I'll be there. It will take about an hour to get there, but I'm leaving right away." When I

## Susie's Garden

arrived, she was overjoyed to see me. She told me that twice police cars had stopped to check on her. In each case she was able to tell them proudly that her husband was on the way and she would be fine. While I was there changing the tire yet another police car stopped for us. The tire changed, we made our way home, relieved that the incident was closed.

Perhaps one of the underlying themes of these two incidents, widely separated in time and space, was that the police serve a vital community function over and above law enforcement. Both times,



*Susan wanted a photo of her husband in action*

we were grateful for their intervention.

Another instance that invoked her ire occurred while she was on a trip for a meeting out-of-state. One evening while she was gone, I received a telephone call from our credit card company. They

said someone was trying to purchase jewelry at a local store in that city and did I authorize the purchase. Years later we would make sure that any cards issued to us would come in pairs, a separate card for each of us with our own name rather than one name on both. But at this time, we each carried a card bearing only my name.

Not registering that it might be Susan trying to make a purchase, I stewed in confusion for a moment before, cornered and needing to provide an answer, I blurted out, “No, I don’t approve.”

It was indeed Susan trying to make the purchase and the declined purchase was a bit embarrassing for her because she was with a few of her friends attending the same meeting. But the repercussions for me were not so benign. Once she got home, she made it quite clear that she didn’t appreciate my decision. Once she calmed down, she also related some of the words she had used in the presence of her

meeting friends to describe what she thought of her husband.

I was too chagrined to suggest that perhaps if she had called me, I could have mended the situation.



Our daughter bore the brunt of another incident. In the lead up to Susan's fiftieth birthday I decided to give her a surprise birthday party. I made reservations at a local bed and breakfast in one of our town's historic homes. The enormous old frame house had a basement that had been converted to an event facility. I called all her relatives, her co-workers and her friends and invited them to the event, asking them at the same time to bring gifts if they so chose. I got a couple of her cousins to invite her to go shopping with them that day, asking them to suggest that after shopping they stop by the bed and breakfast for lunch.

The plan worked to perfection, and on the day and the appointed hour we were all assembled in the event room, luncheon laid out on a table and a big pile of gifts stacked on another table. Susan walked in, totally unsuspecting. The look on her face would have made a good movie scene. Her mouth dropped open, her eyes popped wide and she halted, totally surprised and stunned. We all shouted, "Happy birthday," and "Surprise." Needless to say, when she recovered her composure, she was delighted with the honor of so many of her favorite people being there to celebrate her special day.



*Upside down Susie mugs  
for camera*

We proceeded to serenade her with "Happy Birthday to You" and a few other topical songs, followed by a dive into the luncheon with gusto. Then, it was time to open gifts. There were plenty to open and Susan exclaimed with pleasure over each one. Finally, she came to the last one, my own gift to her in the form of a very large package at

the back of the table. She tried to lift it forward, only to discover that it was quite heavy. I whispered to our daughter,

“Why don't you go up and help her. That one is quite heavy.”

She dutifully joined her mother, only to have Susan put her arms around the half-revealed gift and exclaim in an emphatic voice that approached a primal scream,

“*MINE!*”

Daughter jumped back in surprise and retreated. Susan finished opening the package, to discover that the gift was a large and ornate embossed square metal flower box, made by Virginia's own historic Virginia Metalcrafters. Given her love of flowers, this one was her favorite.



*Susan, dressed to impress*

The surprise birthday party was an enormous success—I had hit it out of the park with the event and with my big gift. Susan was uncharacteristically effusive in her appreciation afterward. As to the immediate out-of-character reaction to daughter's arrival at the gift table, she admitted that she was so emotionally overcome by the surprise of being so honored that just for an instant she had a flashback to our daughter's intermittent raiding of her shoe closet (see section Growing Up with Daughter). The admonition erupted before she could process everything and modulate her reaction. The mood passed instantly, of course, albeit too late for daughter's comfort.

For years thereafter some of her most prized flowers found their way into that metal flower box. Sadly, Virginia Metalcrafters long ago went out of business, and their historical building is now an umbrella market place for small businesses.

## Susie's Garden

The rare outburst such as had sprung forth that day at her surprise birthday party notwithstanding, Susan's mood was almost always upbeat. And, hidden just out of sight was a mischievous eye ever alert to the possibility of a good prank, usually at my expense. The next one might have been her best ever.



As a certified chocoholic I found many ways to satisfy the craving. One of them was a rather odious habit that Susan couldn't break—my ready supply of sippin' chocolate. To wit, I sometimes brought a bottle of chocolate syrup into the living room and deposited it on the table next to my recliner while I watched TV. Taking a sip every now and then was a bit like the cartoon caricature of the mountain man in his front porch rocker, throwing his jug of 'shine over his forearm and taking a slug occasionally.

Now ladies, I know you are all cringing at this point, and most of you would have disowned me by now. But there it was—and fortunately for me Susan tolerated it, albeit reluctantly.

Or so I thought. The cliché says revenge is a dish best delivered cold—and so apparently are the best pranks.



*Fiftieth birthday gift, Virginia Metalcrafters  
flower pot*

On this occasion our daughter was visiting us. For me it was out of sight, out of mind. They were in the kitchen doing kitchen and mother-daughter things and I was in the living room. What they didn't know wouldn't hurt me. How wrong can you be? Unbeknownst to me, our daughter had asked her mother for the chocolate. Naturally Susan, hiding an impish smirk, told her that her

father had it in the living room. Unsuspecting, the pawn of Susan's prank walked in at the very instant I was imbibing. She took one look at the bizarre scene and shrieked,

“Mo-THER he's *drinking* it!”

As she turned and fled from the room, I could hear Susan laughing with glee in the kitchen. She had guessed exactly what would happen. Forever after, when a visit was anticipated, I was forced to buy a separate supply just for our daughter.



In her prime years, Susan was a dynamo of energy and accomplishment. She was active in local and state volunteer organizations. As such she often served as an officer of an organization and her leadership and accomplishments were widely recognized.

In parallel with this, our daughter found a gentleman whose proposal of marriage she accepted. Mother, daughter and son-in-law to be planned the wedding down to the last detail, Susan taking responsibility for the reception and daughter and prospective for the wedding itself.

By one of those annoying confluences of events that happen ever so often, Susan had organizational conferences that she had to plan and preside over the weekend before and the weekend after our daughter's big event. Incredibly, Susan pulled off all three events successfully.

All did not go completely smoothly, however. In the hours before the wedding Susan and I decorated the exterior of the event hall she had rented for the reception. Then, we went to our daughter's house to change for the wedding. We returned to the event hall for a final check on our decorations and to see if the caterer had arrived and begun setup.

To our horror, we found the manager of the hall in the final stages of removing and discarding everything we had done. Susan was furious,

## Susie's Garden

and rightfully so. She confronted the manager, who, regrettably refused to accept responsibility for the mess she had created. Her excuse, the hall had been rented earlier that morning and she thought our carefully planned and installed decorations were left over from the morning event.

Susan wasn't buying it. "You have my cell phone number. Did you ever think to call and ask before you wrecked a couple of hours of work just before we have to go to our daughter's wedding?"

There was no answer to this, of course. Susan and I got busy reclaiming whatever discarded scraps that could be reused and began all over again. The manager woman didn't even have the courtesy to offer to help.



*Susie, impish as ever, prepares to install wedding reception decorations*

Thankfully, having been through the process once, and with the help of brother Ron and his wife Sylvia, we were able to put enough back in place to pass muster while leaving time to get back to the church. The wedding proceeded without a hitch—as did the reception.

This three-week sequence, wherein she pulled off three major events on three consecutive weekends, is a measure of my wife's talent, initiative and drive

for success.



We close this series of sketches by relating the only time Susan ever got me on a dance floor. It was at the wedding of the daughter of one of Susan's cousins. One of the games played during the reception called for all married couples in the room to take positions on the dance floor and dance to the music while the hostess counted up the number of years couples had been wed. I didn't budge, but Susan insisted.

"You don't have to actually dance. We can just hold each other and sway to the music."

Under those conditions, I agreed. Fortunately, the music was slow-dance, else I would have backed out. As the anniversaries grew in years, couples began to leave the floor. The young ones went



*Susan's flower bouquet gift for planning wedding reception*

immediately—no doubt they had no expectation of "winning" but rather they just wanted to dance. Then the middle-aged couples began to fall, one by one.

Finally, the anniversary tally reached those of us of retirement age. We didn't have many competitors left in the contest and I began to worry—what if the winning couple had to remain on the floor and compete a dance set solo. My complete lack of rhythm would be exposed to all. By the time there were only two of us I was in full panic. But thankfully, our anniversary year was called next and I was saved an embarrassing incident.

On the way back to our seats, relieved to have escaped public embarrassment, I told Susan that in retrospect, it had been quite

enjoyable to have her in my arms. She didn't bite and she never offered a repeat performance. Nevertheless, it *had* been nice to hold her close in public and I felt real regret that I deprived her all those years of doing something that she obviously loved—and as I realized too late, would have pleased me as well.

## *Susan's Christmas*

Susan's love of Christmas began long before we met. Nor did that love necessarily wait for Christmas morning. She once admitted that as a young woman still in college and living with her grandparents, her grandmother, Mema, her mother, Joyce, and she



*Opening gifts the night before Christmas*

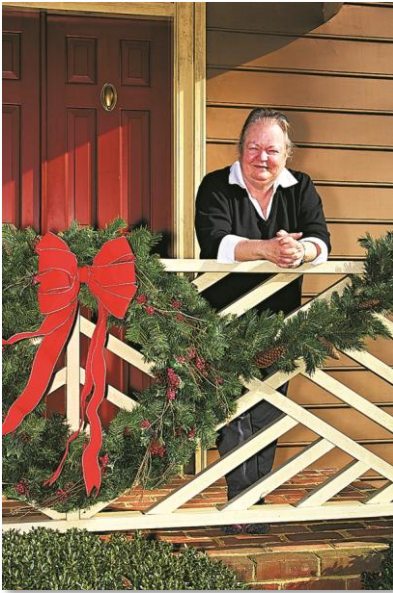
herself would sit around the tree on Christmas eve night drinking spiked eggnog until someone suggested that they open one gift each. Under the influence of eggnog, restraint soon fell by the wayside and, to her disgust of her

grandfather, Fred, the floor would soon be littered with discarded wrapping paper, ribbons and empty boxes.

Her early efforts at our first house previewed what would come later. Once we were in a larger house, she began to collect Christmas decorations in earnest. At its peak she must have had a dozen or more trees, large and small, on display throughout the house. Every spare table had its own small tree, each decorated in a unique style. There were bigger trees tucked in corners, and the feature tree adorned the living room.

After fighting real trees for years, we finally gave in and bought an artificial tree. The problem with that first artificial tree was that it

was huge. Although it broke apart in pieces there was simply no convenient place to store it. So, it went into the attic. Getting the parts up and down a drop ladder was hazardous at best. So, I bought



*Bow and garland welcome  
Christmas visitors*

a hoist and a cargo net and hung the assembly from one of the roof truss cross braces. The hoist was centered over the opening for the attic access drop ladder. From there, I could load one tree section at a time into the cargo net and lower it down. Susan, waiting below as “rigger helper” would unhook the net and remove the tree section from the cargo net to make room for the next section. When Christmas was over, we reversed the process.

Once I got the hoist ropes so twisted that I could never make it right. Taking the lazy way out, I donated it for someone else to wrestle with and bought a new one. Thereafter I was a bit more careful not to get the ropes tangled again.

Even in sections, the tree was a handful, and since our house was a two story, there was still the problem of getting those sections up and down the stairway from second floor to and from the first. Eventually the tree became too much for us and we donated it. That first Christmas afterward we used a skinny tree Susan had previously placed in the dining room as our main tree. This was so much easier to handle and decorate that the next year we bought a proper skinny artificial—a tree that worked perfectly for us and one that Susan decorated right up to the last Christmas. It had its own built in LED lights so we never had to wrestle with light strings again.

Susan literally covered this tree—and the previous one for that matter—with large ball ornaments, garlands, glass trinkets, birds, animals, historical and fictional people, replica historic buildings,

candy canes and more.

The fireplace mantle was always hung with stockings, stuffed with small gifts and various flavors of candy, mostly chocolate.



*Christmas tree, ready for morning*

Susan had long expressed an interest in chickens, so I went looking online for a chicken-themed Christmas stocking. About a dozen pages down in my search I found the ideal stocking. When Susan saw it, she was overjoyed. One Christmas we had so many stocking stuffers for Susan that I got her a second stocking for the overflow, suitably labeled “Susan’s Stocking Annex.” Another Christmas, our daughter made the day a Chicken Christmas, with a plethora of chicken-themed gifts.

Susan had a flair for decorating, not only for Christmas but for every aspect of turning our house into a warm and welcoming home. I quickly learned that her ideas almost always worked better than mine. At last, I finally told her that as far as I was concerned fashion and décor were hers to command. All I asked for was veto rights if I really, *really* didn’t like something. As time went by, the frequency of vetoes diminished to zero.



*Stocking hung, awaiting Christmas*

At its peak, not only did every room and every table have its own tree, but the house was simply overrun with decorations in every nook and bare spot. In addition to trees, every table had a snow globe. There was a vulture (real feathers) on top of the grandfather clock in our



*Football fan Susie gets her own set of penalty flags*



*Mistress of Christmas*

entrance foyer, looking down on each entrant to our home. The entrance foyer turns into a hall leading to our breakfast room. There were two chandeliers, and Susan strung a gold-colored chain between them, from which she suspended hot air balloon replicas. The hot air balloon idea caught on, and thereafter both the dining room chandelier and the breakfast room fixture received its own hot air balloon festival.

We had two corner cabinets in our dining room. The tops of these were prime decorating spots, and they soon had an overhanging greenery border with a raccoon family, owls and a cardinal.

Naturally there were window candles in every window, and not just cheap plastic ones but rather expensive brass versions from Colonial Williamsburg, in the shape of a pineapple, traditional southern fare. At the peak of Susan's decorating frenzy, the garage windows had

## Susie's Garden

their own candles (not the brass ones, thankfully), and our shed, which was really a small separate building, got its own as well. To accomplish this, I had to run an extension cord out of the soffit under the garage roof and along a fence that eventually made its way from the garage to the shed, which I had christened "Garden House" to distinguish it from plastic pre-fab versions.

Outside, our Chippendale porch railing had its own wreath with giant colorful Christmas balls attached. Even larger balls decorated flower pots, now empty with the winter cold. One year she went to the local hardware store and bought a lighted wire frame buck and two does for our yard. When she asked the clerk for these items, the clerk reflected that "every buck should have two does." Such was Susan's sense of humor that she appreciated the double entendre. It was the first thing she talked about when she came home. Needless to say, we both had a good laugh.



*Christmas vulture atop  
grandfather clock*



*Every table with its own tree  
and decorations*

The sheer volume of Christmas decorations created a storage problem. For years we stored everything in the attic. But that created the same retrieval and storage problems as that first bulky artificial tree. Susan eventually took over a spare room in our basement that had previously been used as an overflow bedroom. As empty nesters,

## Susie's Garden

there were now two spares on the second floor, making the basement room redundant.

We bought a number of wire frame shelving units on wheels and Susan boxed everything up in large transparent plastic storage boxes, each labeled on all sides and top with a description of content. (The woman was incredibly organized.) There was even a “First Box” and a “Second Box” for things that should find their assigned locations at the beginning of the season.

Decorating the tree was the height of pre-Christmas activities. This took days, and at its conclusion there was hardly any tree foliage to be seen. As a petite woman she naturally need my help to put stuff on the high limbs, and even I needed a step stool.



*Susan cracks up at gift*



*Lady leads a secret life*

The crowning glory was a small child-like angel that simply slide over the top tip of the tree. It was a simple little thing, no more than a cardboard cone covered in cloth and topped with the angel's head and wings. Yet somehow it was warmer and more inviting than far more expensive versions. Neither of us could remember where it came from or when we got it, but to us it was perfect for our vision of Christmas.

## Susie's Garden

To top Christmas off in style, Susan always laid out a feast for the post gift-opening dinner. The dining room table overflowed with traditional dishes, including stuffing and gravy, corn pudding, cranberry treat, mashed potatoes, mac and cheese, black-eyed peas, green beans, rolls with butter and preserves. The main dish might be ham or beef paprika.

As Susan's health declined, she began to scale back. The multitude of small trees and decorations in other rooms disappeared. But the primary tree never did, and until the last it received its full share of ornaments, garlands and candy canes. And, the pile of gifts underneath was as high as ever.



### *Family Christmas follies—the usual suspects in disguise*

For our family, Susan was the life force who breathed the Christmas spirit into the season. She made Christmas come alive for us, from the tree and the decorations to the gifts to her traditional Christmas feasts, to her own joyous celebration of the season. She was the center of our Christmas universe and we will never view Christmas the same way again.

## Dueling Hobbies

As time passed, our careers advanced and the bank balance began to reflect an occasional surplus after necessary expenses. At such times, we were able indulge in the purchase of optional “things,” items that were to be enjoyed as opposed to expenses that were necessary. Also, Susan’s mother was very generous with gifts of money over the years. The latter meant that those things we bought could finally be a bit more expensive.

My hobbies had long been astronomy and photography. Unfortunately for Susan, both of those hobbies are gear intensive and the gear was quite expensive. This created an imbalance in the way our discretionary funds were spent. Susan bought better quality furniture, including some curio cabinets which she populated with various porcelain figurines and other decorative items. But that only went so far in righting the imbalance. Nor was it personal in the way that my equipment was.

I could tell she was bothered by the high expense of my purchases. She felt left out and wanted to redress the balance. Fortunately, an opportunity revealed itself through a totally unrelated event.



Her father had been from Texas and eventually one of his brothers,



*Milk glass chicken*

her uncle, died in Texas. Since he was intestate and she was the closest living relative, she was legally entitled to inherit. She obtained a lawyer in Texas to represent her—I don’t remember exactly how she found him. However, there was a problem. More distant relatives living in the area had been on the scene when her uncle passed and had taken care of all the funeral and

burial expenses as well as cleaning out his home and disposing of his personal property. They submitted a claim against the estate for their expenses.

Susan's lawyer advised her to fight their claim, which meant a court case, which in turn sent us to Texas for an appearance before a judge. Although I thought the relatives' claims might have been a bit excessive, albeit valid in principle, Susan opted to follow the lawyer's advice. So, to Texas we went. Both sides argued their case, and in the end the judge sided with Susan on strictly legal grounds.

But this didn't end the matter. The other side's lawyer approached us and announced another legal maneuver, leaving the matter open for yet more court appearances and lawyers' expenses. I advised Susan to accept their expense claims after all and be done with the matter. In the end, she did just that and we went home to await the arrival of a final estate settlement.

However, while we were in Texas, in the small town where her uncle had lived and where the trial had taken place, we spent out-of-court hours exploring the town. At some point we wandered into an antique shop to browse. There, Susan spied an artifact that intrigued her, a multicolored glass chicken. She debated for a bit, and I told her, "If you want it, buy it. We'll pack it carefully so we can take it back on the airplane.



*Milk glass rabbit plate*

That glass chicken was the snowflake that unleashed the avalanche. She became intrigued with the history of pieces such as her chicken and discovered a whole world of collectors. Known as milk glass because of its opaque appearance, milk glass was a highly useful product dating back centuries. Unbeknown to most of us today, there is a rich history behind the manufacture and use of milk glass. Long before there was plastic, there was milk glass. Many products came packaged in milk glass that would today be sold in either plastic containers or glass bottles.

The designs of these milk glass containers were marvelously varied and ornate—in short, an art form for art's sake in addition to being functional. Every animal in creation had its series of milk glass representations. One could find plates, ships, buildings, famous figures and many other common subjects rendered as milk glass. Those intended as containers had a top and a bottom. Often milk glass items were manufactured as commemorative gifts in honor of a special event.

This was Susan's path to discretionary spending parity, and she embraced it with a vengeance. She became part of the milk glass collector community, soon to be well known among them for her knowledge and discernment regarding the history not only of the products but also of the manufacturers themselves. The latter are all gone now except for one company that survives on reproductions. There is a milk glass society, and every year collectors can buy from a special run reserved for society members. Susan always looked forward to each year's offering.



Over the years, as financial strains eased—for instance when her father died, we used her inheritance to pay off our mortgage—her sense of having to maintain a fair balance of discretionary spending diminished and we quit worrying about it. When my mother passed away, the proceeds from the sale of her house—split equally between the three brothers—simply went into the checkbook, to be used for whatever need might arise.

We had gotten to the point where we could begin supporting our daughter in the same way that her mother had helped us in earlier years. We had thanked Joyce profusely for each and every gift—at the time it benefited us greatly—and now we were paying it forward. When our grandson came along, we immediately set up a college fund for him, funded with generous annual deposits.

Although not strictly a hobby matching exercise, eventually it came to be time to look into new cars. We had long ago switched from Firebirds and muscle cars to family sedans and station wagons, then to SUVs. Like many families, we found that these flexible vehicles

best met our needs. In Susan's case, the rear cargo area of her compact SUV was a perfect spot for groceries as well as her spring flower buying sprees, and its compact size and maneuverability perfectly suited her style. In my case, the back of my full-size SUV was a perfect place for telescopes or camera gear—or our belongings when we went on family vacations.

Cars do eventually wear out, and mine in particular had gotten to the point where maintenance was a growing expense. So, it was time to figure out how to best broach the subject with Susan. After all, a new car for me and same-old, same-old for her would not sit well. Plus, there was one other factor—our daughter was going to be in need of a new car soon as well. So, my scheme was hatched.

Since Susan's SUV was low mileage, the idea was to sell hers to our daughter and buy Susan a new, off-the-lot compact SUV of her choice. After waiting a decent interval, we would return to the dealer and pick out something to replace my aging full-size. Daughter was willing, so I popped the question to Susan, "Do you want a new car?"

Ever cost conscious, she initially waffled, but I managed to get her to a dealer, just to "see what they've got." She took one look at a new compact SUV painted in a gleaming molten lava color and signed that very day. Daughter dutifully purchased Susan's low-mileage hand-me-down and I sat back and bided my time. Six months later, I announced—truthfully—that my car needed maintenance and repairs running into the thousands of dollars. Better to replace it with something new. She gave me a look, having finally figured out my strategic plan, but she said nothing in opposition.

Off we went again, and I came home with our second car purchase in half a year. Our bank account looked like it had been picked over by buzzards, but Susan was happy, as was I. Given our age, she pronounced our new acquisitions to be our "forever cars." The old lively Susie re-emerged and she proclaimed that her car was the "perfect car" whereas mine was just "OK."

Smiling to myself, I could live with that. Wife was happy, daughter was happy and I got what was needed in order to avoid growing maintenance expenses.

## *Susie the Sports Fan*

Susan wasn't always a sports fan. For most of our marriage sports was something I did and other things occupied her time—taking care of our children, gardening, raising bluebirds, becoming involved in outside organizations and so on. She did go with me on a few birding expeditions to Florida, but then birds were a big love for her too—it was a case of something for both of us, much as our summer Eastern Shore vacations had been (See *Island at the End of the Road*).



*Susan at pro tennis tournament*

Her mother lived out-of-state, near an Indy car race track, and a few times we visited in order to attend the races held on their track. We both enjoyed this, I for the speed and she for the excitement of the event and to enjoy being in a crowd. At the first race we attended we watched from front row seats. When the cars went by on their parade lap at perhaps 100 mph I told Susan, “I could do that.” She said nothing, but when the racers came by on the first real lap at 200 mph, it was an explosion of sound and speed, and I gave up my budding ambition to be an Indy car driver.

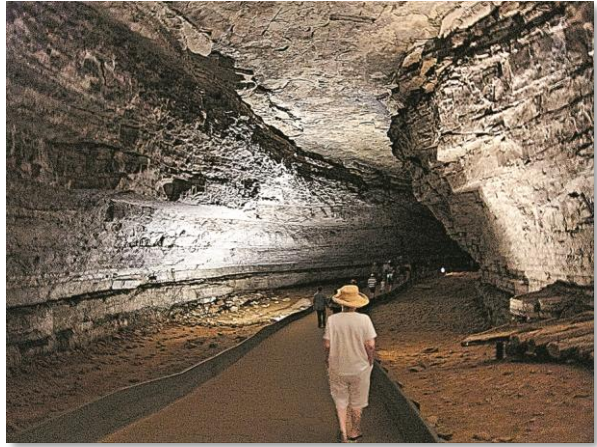
Her lack of interest in watching sports changed early in the 2000s. As a lifelong tennis player, I had watched professional matches on TV occasionally, but after retiring in 2004 I was able to watch more tennis on cable and I found there was much to learn about technique from watching the modern game. I also developed a wish to attend a professional tournament. In 2006, I decided on the tournament held near Cincinnati each year before the US Open. Cincinnati was a day-long drive, but I could stay in a hotel all week and attend every session. The Cincinnati tournament had the additional cachet of being the oldest tournament in North America to be played

## Susie's Garden

continuously in the same city. So, I bought a seat and went. Although the tennis was terrific, I rediscovered what I had always known—I didn't like being there alone, I wanted Susan with me.

It took some convincing since sports weren't her forte but, in the end, she made the trip. As it turned out, it was a great experience for both of us. After the first year, baking in the August Midwest sun, she found a brand of protective sun clothing and thereafter we came dressed looking like desert dwellers. I carried a camera with a telephoto lens and she carried a bag with everything we needed for a day at the facility. We had Center Court seats about half way up in the Loge section, looking directly down on the south baseline. Depending on who was playing on which court we wandered the grounds, looking for the best matches throughout the day.

We snacked at the food court during the day and dined at good restaurants every evening—Susan loved that



*Susan explores Mammoth Cave*

part. Occasionally we would see a player or tournament officials at a nearby table. I took hundreds of photographs each trip. This was the era dominated by well-known players such as Roger Federer, Raphael Nadal and Novak Djokovic, all of whom won many slams in their career.

Watching world class players from the stands rather than on TV was a revelation. TV coverage usually shows the action from behind one of the baselines. Tele photo lenses must be used and the distance compression effect of such lenses makes it appear as if balls aren't going particularly fast. But viewed from the side in the stands, it's a different story. The balls come off these players' racquets like rockets, and the players themselves virtually throw themselves into each shot.

One gains a fresh appreciation for just how much athletic skill is involved.

Perhaps our best year was 2017, the last year we went and the year of The Great American Solar Eclipse. Although the tennis was good,



*Susan watches eclipse through solar glasses*

Susan began to suffer significantly from the hot August Ohio sun. She told me after that trip that she would continue to come with me in future years even if she had to stay in the hotel and read. I said, “No, absolutely not. I can’t do that to you.” In any case, the tournament schedule that year coincided with the eclipse, and we were able to hook up with a tour offered by a company in conjunction with Sky and Telescope magazine, one of the premier amateur astronomy periodicals.

The day before the eclipse we drove from Cincinnati to Nashville where our tour was to originate, stopping along the way at Mammoth Cave National Park. The crowd was unbelievable; evidently everyone else on the way to eclipse viewing locations had the same idea. That night we stayed in a hotel in downtown Nashville, rendezvousing with my brother Andy and his wife for dinner that evening—they lived nearby, and it was good to reestablish connections as we had not been able to visit with them for a while.

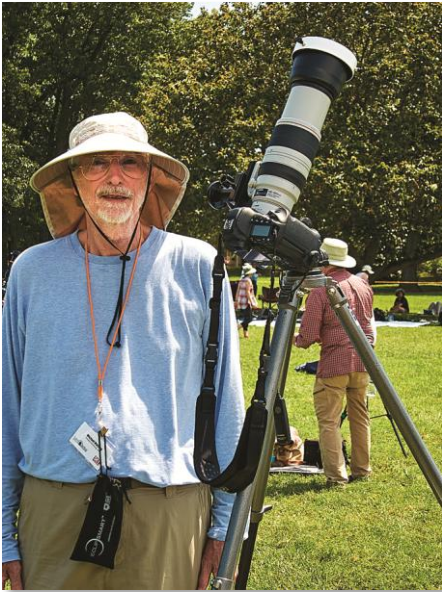
The eclipse event itself was fabulous; the tour company had made exclusive arrangements with a local community college in Kentucky so our group had a privileged and uncrowded location to ourselves. Not so, the traffic, however; it was a mess coming and going. We had brought both solar glasses and solar binoculars; with the latter we had better views than almost everyone else. I had brought my camera and telephoto lens with a solar filter and a tripod so I was able to photograph the entire event

After a successful foray into tennis, Susan now began watching professional football with me in the fall. Prior to that, she always

found something else to do on Sunday afternoons. But once she started watching with me it became one of her favorite things. Of course, for her it was color and motion and excitement without regard to the details of the game. But as she watched more and more, she began to ask questions. Not surprisingly, her mischievous side quickly emerged and she was soon tossing out her usual silly propositions to tease me and to provide fodder for a discussion.

For example, when an offensive lineman was penalized for holding, she would complain that the rule was wrong—they should be able to hold anyone any time they wanted. If pass interference was called, she wanted to know why that rule even existed. And more. The goal of course was to get me started so we could liven up the game with a back-and-forth, where her agile mind could test itself against mine. She loved these debates, pointless as they might seem to others.

Once during a game, she adamantly disagreed with a penalty call. “I wish I had my own referee flag so I could throw it and call my own

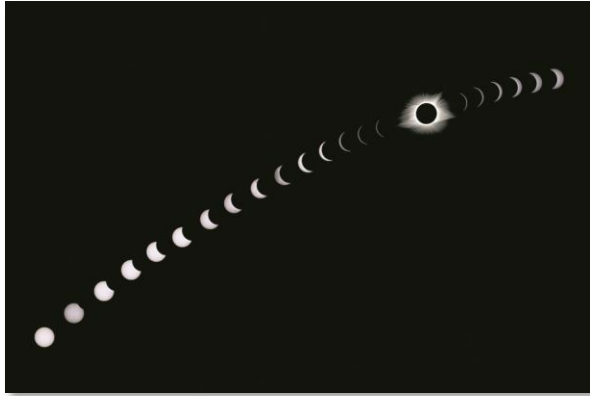


*Eclipse photography setup, with mandatory solar filter*

penalties. So, that Christmas I ordered her a set of red and yellow referee flags. She loved it. Another Christmas gift arose from her trips to her clinic once she went on dialysis. While she could still drive herself, I would always walk her to her car and, as she began to back out of the garage, I would give hand signals as if I was an airport worker and she were a pilot backing away from the passenger gate. That Christmas I bought her a set of taxiway light wands. Another Christmas, I bought her a trophy topped by a chicken and labeled “Susan Masters,

Champion Participant” as a spoof on the tendency to give everyone an award, even those who never got into the game.

She always appreciated these gag gifts—and she was well able to reciprocate in kind. One Christmas she gave me a bull whip—but for any nefarious purpose that might come to your mind, dear reader. Having often been disappointed that a product I wanted to buy again was no longer available, I had a saying, “If you like something buy a lifetime supply because it may never be made again.” Then I would add, “Of course, there is a down side to that approach—you may wind up with a barn full of buggy whips!” This was the inspiration.



*2017 eclipse time lapse composite*

Returning to football, at some point I suggested that we pick winners each week and keep track across the season to see who was the better picker. I secretly figured that I would win hands down. Surprisingly, she accepted the challenge, so for the next two seasons we both picked winners for each game for each week in the season, tallying up total wins and losses as we went along.

It didn't take me long to realize I had bitten off more than I could chew. Both years, I pulled an early lead in the overall scoring, only to see my lead vanish as the weeks rolled by. As the end of the season approached it was evident that we would come down to a photo finish.

The thing that drove me bonkers was that her method was simply to pick based on comparative won-loss records for each game—she knew virtually nothing about the teams, the players, the coaches or any other contributions to team performance.

I, on the other hand, spent hours each week poring over expert picks, game simulation results, injury reports, matchup statistics and all the other accouterment of a true football fan. None of that mattered for

her. It was only team won and lost records. Well, there was also the matter of who had the snazziest uniforms. I could only marvel at the futility of my heavily researched approach.

Eventually, we got NFL Red Zone on our TV cable feed and she enjoyed that even more than individual games—it was constant motion and action. She began to criticize coaching strategy. “Why did they run the ball there? Everyone knows you have to pass to win.” She was all for excitement.

A minor league baseball team came to town and she immediately announced that we should go to their games. So, I bought tickets for a few games, with seats behind the foul ball netting near first base. Our seats were good ones and there was plenty of action to see. She asked her usual questions about the game and the rules, and I was surprised at how much I remembered from my childhood days.

By this time declining health had limited her mobility and endurance so I always let her out right in front of the ticket gate and then parked the car separately. The walk from the parking lot was too much for her. When I joined her, I would buy her a bottle of tea and a basket of fries. We would sit together watching the game while I tore open packets of ketchup for her fries. She enjoyed the between innings entertainment for children as much as she did the game itself.

Eventually we discovered that the ball park had special days, called Bark in the Park games, where people brought their dogs to the game. Thereafter all of our games were Bark days. Never shy about approaching strangers, she would ask owners if she could pet their dogs. She came to love these outings as much as anything she could still do in her health-compromised condition. I enjoyed them



*Susan's Christmas football referee penalty flags*

because it gave me a chance to explain the game to her. And I enjoyed it because it pleased her. As her health had begun to decline, I wanted more than anything in the world to see her happy.

## *Earthquake!*

On one sunny afternoon our daughter was visiting from out of town. We were all gathered in our living room having a delightful visit when a deafening roar burst forth from no direction and all directions at once, accompanied by house shaking vibrations. Susan immediately exclaimed,

“It’s a jet plane about to crash!”

I interjected immediately, “No, it’s a tornado. We’ve got to get to the basement immediately.”

My guess was based on past experience. Once, years before, I had been upstairs when a similar ear-shattering roar drove out all else. At the time I had made the same guess as Susan, but subsequent news flashes identified the sound as a tornado.

Fortunately for us, it has jumped our neighborhood and touched down a mile or two further on. From memory, this sound was much the same, in volume as well as character.



*Susan loved Bark in the Park baseball games*

Our daughter spoke up. “No, it is an earthquake. It has to be. Feel the floor shaking.” We quickly realized she was right.

Once the shock wore off, my first thought as a homeowner was damage. Our house was largely brick on the outside and I

immediately went outdoors to check the exterior. At first glance, all seemed well; there were a few broken mortar seams but nothing looked difficult to repair. Congratulating myself on a narrow escape, I happened to look up before going back inside.

The top several courses of the chimney were detached and sitting free from the courses below. That changed everything.

Suppressing the urge to panic, I hurried into the house and headed straight for the phone. We had a favorite renovation contractor, and I placed a call immediately. Fortunately, we were the first to get to him so we went straight to the front of the queue.

Our brick was no longer in production so we lost a couple of courses but otherwise the chimney survived. The broken mortar seams were easy by comparison. We also lost a few items inside that had vibrated off shelves and fallen to the floor. Thankfully, we lost nothing that could not be repaired or replaced. We were lucky compared to many.

## Susie's Garden

## Career Path



*Our greatest glory is not in never falling  
But in rising every time we fall*  
— Confucius

*Life isn't about finding yourself  
Life is about creating yourself*  
— George Bernard Shaw



By the time Susan and I moved into our dream home, we had both achieved journeyman status in our professions. Susan continued to work in missile targeting and I was repeatedly thrust into a leadership position in the shrinking world of older systems. By about the mid-1980s we each began looking for something else. Susan was outstanding at what she did so advancement to a senior position was the next step for her.



*Michael and the ever-lovely Susan at 40*

In order to quality, she was told by management that she needed to broaden her experience by taking a rotation into another group for a while. A tactical missile system was recommended since there was a strong component of targeting associated with that system as well as her current job. She accepted the assignment but liked it so well she never returned.

It was there that she got her promotion and it was there that she made a significant impact on the military. Her skills were quickly noticed by management in her new organization. After getting acclimated to a new system, she began to look around for something a little different. Because she was very detail oriented, and because she refused to ever make a mistake—or to allow a mistake to be made by those she came in contact with—she gravitated to fielding problems



*Susan and Christmas bunny*

in deployed systems, riding herd on fixes to those problems and making sure that the solutions solved the problem.

Eventually she became *the* quality control manager for tracking control system software problems and ensuring that the fixes met requirements. When program reviews were called by sponsoring officers and the systems commands (system acquisition agents), she was always on stage to brief the latest status. This put her squarely in the crosshairs of four different organizations, each with conflicting interests and goals: the program

sponsors, who were paying the freight; the prime contractor, who was responsible for system development; the end user, who had to be certain that their operational requirements were met; and her own management, which was organizationally responsible for providing the support required.

She was highly intelligent, highly competent, and she had an inborn

and stubborn refusal to be wrong about anything. As a result, no matter the pressures on her, she always stood up for what she knew to be correct. She had matured into an outstanding professional engineer. Of her, one of the officers in the program office described her as, “*the conscience of our system.*”

At her final service after she passed, one individual who knew her professionally said that the military and the nation owed her a profound debt of gratitude for her contributions to one of the nation's premier weapon systems—a system



*Susan's hat collection rivaled her shoe closet*

that today appears in the news anytime there is conflict anywhere in the world where our military has a presence. Just the threat of supplying this system to allies constitutes a major geopolitical bargaining chip.

The combination of heartache, extra work and physical and emotional drain arising from David's situation in combination with the pressures of a job of such high visibility and importance combined to impact her personality. The impish, teasing personality was still there, but now it was overlaid with a shell of no-nonsense cynicism—a protective mechanism that anyone who has worked in a high-pressure job can relate to. To apply the common idiom, she didn't suffer fools gladly. Nor was she bashful about saying so.

Despite her reluctance to show emotion, the fire was there, burning deeply within and finding expression only under the most exceptional circumstances. When she retired, she invited me to her going away swan song, held with her co-workers. Many gave her tribute with glowing accolades.

One young man, many years her junior, who had been put in a

## Susie's Garden

nominal position as her supervisor, said in a rather marveling tone of voice, “When I first met Susan, I thought she was *mean!* But I came to realize that she just wanted the job done right and she wasn’t going to accept otherwise.”

How true. And, to be clear, Susan was never bossed by anyone and certainly not by me—we were partners in life in every sense of the word. She was self-motivated, regardless of the circumstances, and she never had to be told either what was right or what to do. The few times I made the mistake of trying the pushback was instant.

I am deeply honored that, with all the physical beauty, personal charm, captivating smile, quirky personality, high intelligence and professional competence that she possessed, she chose me to share our life’s journey with.



*Michael and Susan, Treasure Isle, Florida (Photo brother Ron M.)*

## A Tragic Birth



*Autism isn't a one person-one effect type of situation.  
Autism impacts the entire family.  
And it does so not only while the individual with autism  
is a young child or teenager but for their entire life  
— from National Autism Academy*



nce again, our move had coincided with another Susan pregnancy. She delivered a son, David, on 4 May 1978, just months before we moved in. This time the blues were a bit worse, possibly because I had a premonition about this birth, not the first or the last instance of misgivings that proved justified, and she undoubtedly picked up my fears—she had developed an ability to read me better than I could read myself. But the new house and the immediate need to provide care for a newborn soon brought our attention back to business.

We had enlisted Mema for care services during the move, but now we needed a new sitter; the lady who had cared for our daughter wished to step down. Reluctantly, we were forced to advertise. There were plenty of candidates, and we finally selected an older woman with grown children of her own. Her husband was a carpenter, and sometime later, far sooner than we expected, we hired him to replace our front porch railing—painted or not, it had rotted out far sooner than we expected. Also, he replaced a tiled basement drop-ceiling that had been poorly installed by the contractor we chose to finish the

basement.

She stayed with us for many years. She was a jewel of a woman—in addition to caring for David, she cleaned house. Her willingness to do everything we asked of her proved to be a Godsend, for David developed slowly, so slowly that we could no longer ignore missed milestones. In fact, he never developed speech. Having a reliable sitter relieved us of a big worry. In desperation we began an odyssey from one doctor to another, seeking answers. Our son underwent the usual medical tests without turning up anything amiss. The next step was evaluation for other developmental factors. The diagnosis was autism.

This diagnosis had a profound effect on all of us, but Susan bore the overwhelming brunt of it—the mother always does. Fortunately, our



*Susan dressing our son*

housekeeper stuck with us so we were able to continue in our jobs. With diagnosis in hand, we began learning everything we could about autism. The percentage of live births so diagnosed

continues to rise, and it soon entered the consciousness of the public, leading to extended heated debate within the medical community, a controversy that endures to this day.

We began to consult specialists, subjecting David to ever more exotic testing. In his case tests suggested faint traces of pollution contamination, possibly waterborne. We immediately had our water tested, but the result came back negative for all contaminants. Unfortunately, we had no access to our first house, the one-story rambler. But our daughter had been born there, had experienced her

early childhood there—and had turned out to be not only free of symptoms but in fact a very intelligent child.

Thus, we were never able to definitively isolate a cause—or even verify that water contamination was involved. We were left to cope with the problem as best we could. I immediately joined the only activist organization in town devoted to lobbying for better services for the mentally impaired. I participated for years, even trooping to the capitol with other activists to lobby for better funding for services, particularly residential. During this time, I met many of local officials charged with responsibility for serving the needs of the mentally impaired community. Because funding for services was so scarce it took a long time before our son's number reached the top of the queue, but the severity of his affliction was so great that he was eventually accepted into a group home. He resides there now, getting the care he needs.

But that came later. When he reached school age he boarded a special education bus each week day. At first, the housekeeper handled getting him on the bus and meeting him when he came home, but the time came when we were on our own. We were forced to work a split shift to make sure someone was always there. I would go in very early, oh-dark-thirty by the idiom. Susan would get him on the bus in the morning and then drive to work separately. I was there in the afternoon to meet the bus.

About that time, the facilitated communication fad gained prominence. In this technique, someone holds the affected person's hand while he or she taps out a message on a keyboard or a drawing of alphabet keys, spelling out non-verbal thoughts. He and I were adept at this. It was by facilitate communication that we discovered



*Bundled up for snow*

that he had taught himself to read by looking at catalogs. He was able to identify exotic colors such as mauve and chartreuse, a great surprise to us.

He was original too—on his own he coined the phrase, “Easy to look at.” When he had to have his wisdom teeth pulled, he came home in a stew— “An angry bubba attacked my teeth.” Perhaps his one redeeming virtue, then and now, is that he has a highly perceptive sense of humor. As a keen observer of human nature, he will sometimes laugh before a person realizes they’ve done something stupid—as he does when I, for instance, miss a turn in our car.

But like many things surrounding autism, facilitated communication too became mired in controversy and eventually fell out of favor. Nevertheless, when he reached high school age it turned out that he was smart enough to sit in algebra class and keep up. He was initially inspired by this, but it is difficult to progress beyond a certain point if one cannot write out equations and the steps involved in solving them. He eventually gave up and lapsed into an intellectual lethargy from which he has never emerged. In a family of two smart women and a capable father he might have been the smartest of all had he not been cursed at birth through no fault of his own.

All of this was bad enough, but worse by far was his behavior. He roamed, all day and most of the night. Eventually, Susan chose to stay up with him until he finally fell asleep. Mistakenly thinking they were doing good, the school attempted to teach him to cook. This was very nearly a disaster. One night after Susan and I were asleep he turned on the stove and tried to cook something. He managed to catch a dish towel on fire and stuffed it into a kitchen drawer, the scorch marks from which are still visible today. When that didn't work, he tossed the still-smoldering towel into a stack of dirty clothes baskets. The towel burned through the top two baskets—both of which had to be discarded—and left a dimple in the third, which still sits in our laundry area today.

There were other disruptive behaviors as well. He could be quite destructive of property. One never knew what he would pick up and proceed to damage or destroy. Susan and I were always hiding things that needed protection. To Susan's dismay he pulled all the blooms

off her fringe tree, prize tulips and other flowers.

We were able to attempt a return to a normal life through the auspices of a couple of respite camps for handicapped individuals. One was a week-long summer camp in the western part of the state, and it gave us the opportunity to take real vacations. The second camp was in the southern part of the state. Both were godsend for parents of disabled children. Also, a local group instituted a Saturday afternoon respite program, held at a local church. This gave us the chance to take a few hours off every Saturday, also a great relief. Without these outlets I'm not sure we could have maintained our sanity.

In retrospect, I believe two people were most harmed by this—Susan and our daughter. Susan, because she was the one who stayed up with him at night, the stress dulling her bright eyes and the lively, mischievous spirit that had made our marriage such a delight for both of us. I could see the light of joy slowly fading and the withdrawn, solitary retreats becoming more frequent.



*Riding the bus to summer camp*

Our daughter suffered in great measure as well. He invaded her room any time she

wasn't there, damaging and wrecking her most prized childhood possessions. While Susan and I were adults and could perhaps maintain perspective and some sense of responsibility however much damage to our psyches it left behind, our daughter had no way to assert control over a situation that no child should endure.

While people who knew us were understanding and sympathetic, for which we were grateful, one thing drove Susan to make a caustic reply every time it occurred, something she never did before our son came along. Occasionally we would encounter a good-hearted woman who, upon being told of his condition, would respond, "Oh you must feel

so blessed to have him.”

This sent Susan over the edge. She icy reply: “Where is the blessing in a child who can never grow up to be a functioning adult and whose parents are deprived of seeing that child mature to a happy and productive life.” While such comments were kindly meant and innocently made and were undoubtedly intended to convey comfort, it revealed a profound lack of understanding of the depth of disruption autism causes to families—not to ignore the loss of a normal life and productive future for the person afflicted. It is a never-ending human calamity viewed from any aspect angle.

In Susan's case, our son's persistent roaming not only permanently scarred her but it also changed her sleep patterns. Forever after she was a night owl, staying up late on her solitary watch, and then taking naps in the afternoon to compensate. It was a tragedy for everyone—Susan for the permanent change to her personality and her physical health, for our daughter for the loss of childhood happiness and security, for our son, who would never lead a normal life, and for me,



*Family Christmas; behind us, Susan's tree is just getting started*

for the loss of not only a male heir but also loss of the happy, affectionate and carefree loving wife of our courtship days and early marriage.

## Susie's Garden

I firmly believe that the scars left behind by her unhappy childhood experiences with her father and stepfather, combined with the unspeakable tragedy of our son's never-ending problems, contributed greatly to Susan's inability to care for her health as she might otherwise have done. Absent the deep-seated effects of these factors, I believe Susan would still be with us, a happy golden older woman, enjoying her senior years with me as she did in our early days.

## Susie's Garden

## *Life is Not Just Work*



*Never get so busy making a living  
That you forget to make a life*  
— Dolly Parton

*If you want to change the world  
Go home and love your family*  
— Mother Teresa



Looking back, almost everything we did, almost every place we went was Susan's idea. I can only recall three exceptions that were my suggestions. The first was Florida, selected for the birding and photography opportunities. The next was the professional tennis tournament held every year near Cincinnati. I am



*Elizabethan Gardens, Manteo,  
Roanoke Island*

a lifelong recreational player, and the chance to see and photograph professionals I followed on TV was a big draw. The final destination was Skyline Drive and the Shenandoah Mountains. It was my suggestion rather than hers because she had been so many times as a child that there was little new for her.



*Susan and bear, Big Meadows, Skyline Drive, Shenandoah Mountains*

We visited Colonial Williamsburg early in our marriage at her suggestion, and we became so enamored with the unique Virginia tidewater colonial architecture that our second house adopted much of the colonial style. Over the years we visited many times, and in 2019 the trip became an annual staple. Inspired by the 1995 release of the Colin Darcy and

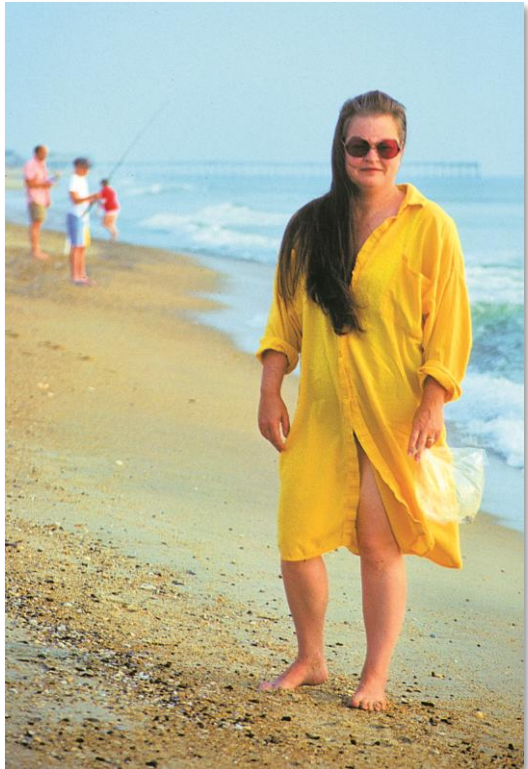
Jennifer Ehle version of “Pride and Prejudice,” I had become a Janeite, a lover of Jane Austen’s novels. In 2019, the Jane Austen Society of North America held their annual meeting at the Lodge in Colonial Williamsburg. Susan, although a mystery lover above all else, graciously agreed to accompany me for the opportunity to revisit Williamsburg. I immediately joined JASNA in order to buy tickets for the event and booked rooms for us at the Lodge.



*Susan chats with Colonial Williamsburg Gardener*

something she always enjoyed. We checked the schedule of events each day and, depending on interest, took to the streets of the restored area to renew our acquaintance with 18<sup>th</sup> century architecture and customs. Ever the curious one, Susan often stopped colonial interpreters to ask questions. Our trips in subsequent years saw Susan increasingly gravitate to the colonial gardens, flowers and gardening being one of the highlights of her life, especially in her retirement years. On the last trip, in May of 2025 she spent an hour or more talking to the colonial gardener, bombarding her with questions about the gardening customs of the time.

In recognition of her gardening interest, after the 2019 trip I began a project to photograph every colonial garden in the restored area. Fortunately, there is an exhaustive list on the Colonial Williamsburg web site. In parallel with this, I began a project to photograph every building featured in *The Guide*, a compendium of 153 restored and reproduction structures. The book includes the building's history, owners, line drawings of front façades, and maps. I finished the effort during our last trip.



*On the beach, still strikingly attractive*

While I always made reservations for the same May window that reservation may fall off the edge. In the 55 years of our marriage, I always regretted being alone on trips that she was not me. On those few occasions I would return home and ask her if she would go with me next time. This pattern was repeated with my Florida bird

## Susie's Garden

photography expeditions, my trips to the Cincinnati tennis tournament and with visits to relatives.



Our first real vacation after we were married and while our daughter was still young, was to Charleston, South Carolina. This was her idea. It was here that her love of flowers and gardening began to manifest itself. Although I was more interested in Patriot Point, especially the museum ship, Yorktown CV-10, the successor Essex class carrier named in honor of the original Yorktown CV-6, lost at Midway, she gently steered us to the gardens of the area.

Once our daughter was old enough, we took her with us on our vacations. We began in Virginia Beach but soon abandoned it due to crowding. Susan then suggested Nags Head in North Carolina. We vacationed there for several years and while we all enjoyed the beach we did other things. She flew kites with our daughter on the dunes. We visited the lighthouse at Duck, north of Nags Head. Daughter and I took hang gliding lessons; she was a natural, I was a klutz. I simply was



*Susan on upper deck, Yorktown CV10,  
Patriot's Point, Charleston, South  
Carolina*

not blessed from birth with natural balance; I could never ski, roller skate or ice skate. The one time I tried to water ski it took half an hour to get upright. The next day I felt like I needed to be in a body cast.) Daughter, on the other hand, was soon soaring from the top of

## Susie's Garden

our trainer dune. I usually augured in half way down.

But the thing Susan loved best about our Nags Head visits was the Elizabethan Gardens at Manteo on Roanoke Island.

The photos of her here are among my favorites, and I recently rendered several of them as photographic art using Photoshop filters. The one I like best was a setup



*Nag's Head winds are ideal for kite flying*

composition, captured in a formal hedge and flower garden under crepe myrtle trees. She is poised between the diverging trunks of a crepe myrtle, and in the background, there is a ring of hedges with brilliant tall red blooms inside. Perhaps it is my overactive imagination, but my preconception of the image is that of a mystery woman appearing from nowhere, juxtaposed with the red fires of the nether region dancing in the nearby hedge ring. Over the top I know, but that was my imagination at work.



*Bare feet in Nag's Head surf*

This urge to explore new territory followed us all the days of our marriage. Our town has a dinner theater, and she tracked their play bill closely until she

found a production she knew would resonate with me, an Andrew

## Susie's Garden

Lloyd Webber retrospective. We went, enjoyed the meal and the music. Early in her last year, she brought us back to the dinner theater idea when Jesus Christ Superstar came to the theater. We enjoyed this one even more. This time we bought tickets for the matinee session and I decided to semi-dress up. She took one look at me and shook her head sadly. “You look like something out of the 1970s. You do realize that the matinee session will be attended by older people like us and that none of them will dress up.” As usual she was right. I was the odd duck at the performance. But I must confess, I thought I looked downright dapper!

In retrospect the woman was almost never wrong. Looking back over the years, I can recall many times she made suggestions that I didn't



*Mystery woman at gateway to fiery decent*

follow—choices where her pick turned out to be better than my decision. I am left to wish I could turn back the clock and pay more attention to her advice instead.

Her next request was a late summer production of Sound of Music. We both loved the movie so a dinner theater production seemed a great choice. I bought tickets for the matinee presentation on her birthday, August 27, intending for it to be a special day for her. But

## Susie's Garden

events overtook us. That summer she took terribly ill and went into the hospital, emerging only to return home under hospice care.

It is said that people recover over time after such losses. For me, I am doubtful. After 55 years of constant companionship in the company of a woman who meant everything to me, meant life itself, her absence is an ache that fills every day with emptiness, every night with loss.



*Admiring Taliaferro-Cole Garden*

## Susie's Garden

## *Susie's Garden*



*In the garden of your heart,  
love is the most beautiful flower.*

— Unknown

*A flower cannot blossom without sunshine,  
and a man cannot live without love.*

— Freidrich Max Muller

*She is like a wildflower; beautiful, fierce, and free.*

— Unknown



As soon as we were in our first house Susan started growing flowers. She was too busy as a new wife, mother and professional employee to do as much as she wanted, but she did start cuttings in the kitchen window and a few plants on stands in windows with sun exposure. There was a row of forsythia along our driveway and a row of marigolds along the back of the house. These were perennial flowers so they didn't require much care—just watering and an occasional scoop of plant fertilizer.

Once we were in our second house, things picked up. Initially all we could do was hire a local landscaper to put in the usual shrubs across the front of the house along with ground cover in the interstices. But

## Susie's Garden

over time, and especially after she retired, gardening became her primary leisure pursuit. She did most of her own work, including



*Marigold child*

digging if the soil permitted. If the soil was particularly dry and hard-packed I broke the ground with pick and shovel and excavated to the depth she wanted. Regardless, every flower hole got a healthy dose of

organic fertilizer. She liked all-organic because one could never use too much.

She accumulated an extensive library of gardening books, which she studied regularly. Her studied approach illustrates the truism that no one becomes successful or expert without working diligently toward the mastery of their chosen field.

In the beginning there was only a vestigial front lawn between the house and our circular driveway, leaving her little real estate to do what she envisioned. Eventually she announced that she wanted to bring in a heavy-duty landscaper to uproot the entire front lawn, fill in and flatten out the gentle slope of the lawn to the driveway and build a stone retaining wall, creating space for a flower garden and giving the property a far more attractive appearance.

She hired the largest landscape and nursery company in the area and they got to work. Soon we had new shrubs and plants plus the makings of a flower garden—empty space where her creative gardening urge could find scope. She began planting flowers with a vengeance. Since that front lawn was one of the few places that got sun, it was planted heavily with daisies, black-eyed Susans and garden flox. In between, she interspersed low lying plants and flowering ground covers. Eventually we added a ground level bird

## Susie's Garden

bath, partly for the birds but also as an outdoor water source for our cat. The back yard had long since gotten its own bird baths to complement our bird feeders.

The front garden area was delineated by the stacked stone wall she had envisioned. Large stepping stones leading to each side yard. A



*Susan didn't plant in rows, she preferred a more irregular, "it just grew" look*

narrow plot of ground three feet in front of the wall provided separate space for low flowers and ground cover. It had the additional advantage that the proximity to the driveway meant that vole access was limited to the open ends. In fact, she never did have voles in that plot.

She also wanted a curated back yard garden and an herb garden. At about the that time we decided to add a separated garage accessible via a covered breezeway. Given her maturing ideas of what she

wanted to do with her garden, we had a custom garden house added in the style of our main house and garage. Once she started on the back yard, I suggested that I lay down stone paths throughout her intended garden area, partly to get



*Front yard garden*

around without walking too much on our back yard grass, which kept a tenuous hold on the soil due to summer shade from the trees we

had kept. This had the advantage of creating small distinct bordered plots where she could design and plant a mix of flowers according to a chosen theme. The finishing touch was a vast array of decorative flower pots, including that square pot given to her on her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The conclusion she quickly reached was that, given that we lived in a thickly wooded area, she must perforce become a shade gardener. Such was her independence of spirit and her determination to succeed at whatever she attempted that she set out to learn all there was to know about shade gardening, absorbing and then applying a variety of resources. Hostas became a staple wherever there was a dearth of sun. Other plants made an appearance, among them ligularia, linden rose and liriopse.

Much like her interest in bird behavior rather than 'life lists,' she wasn't interested in titles. While the term Master Gardener recognizes a level of knowledge and accomplishment perhaps a bit



*Black-eyed Susans, my favorite*

analogous to a high school or college diploma, most such programs are for traditional gardens where plenty of sun is available. This she didn't have so the idea of going this route just didn't seem relevant to the specifics of the options available in her particular situation.

She did, however, greatly enjoying swapping information about plants, flowers and gardening approaches in general with her sister-in-law, Sylvia—an accomplished master gardener of the conventional sun-rich variety.

The style she evolved resembled an English country garden. There was nothing formal about it. Her philosophy was to plant things in clumps and let them spread naturally. She always planted individual flowers twice as dense as book recommendations. The result was that everything grew thick and lush, giving the garden a rich and inviting appearance.

## Susie's Garden

Her herb garden began life as a little clear plot between our driveway and the property line. I even bordered and terraced it with 4X6 timbers. However, it never got sun and did not prosper. Susan attributed this to a small tree nearby. I suggested that other, taller trees were responsible, but once the bit was in her teeth nothing could



*Susie's flowers, garden house and glider plaza*

stop her. One day I came home to find that she had taken an axe and “girdled” the tree in an attempt to kill it. Remarkably the tree survived this attempt and eventually she agreed that the plethora of much taller surrounding trees were the real problem. The chosen location was simply unsuitable. Later she migrated the herb garden to a sunlit patch next to our garage. There it prospers to this day.

Susan began growing flowers in the house as well as outside. Soon every window in the house, upstairs and down, had its own plant stand and a flower variety chosen for the sun it might receive at that window. Among her favorites was Christmas cactus, a flower that at one time filled four windows across the front, spanning living room and dining room, as well as a fifth living room window with southern exposure.

## Susie's Garden

She tried but failed to grow orchids, something our daughter could do seemingly without effort. Any time there was a visit in either direction, the first mother-daughter activity was a walkaround, inside and out, to inspect the old and see what was new. Daughter learned



*Susan doing what she loves*

much from her mother and Susan in turn picked up pointers from her daughter. During this period, they continued to be every bit as close as they had been when our daughter was growing up. The difference was, of course, that now our daughter was a successful professional in her own right, with a family of her own. We both enjoyed having an adult “best friend” with whom we could share thoughts and experiences. Throughout, we continued to take annual vacations together (see *The Island at the End of the Road*).

During our vacations we always looked for local gardens that were open to visitors. At Nags Head we visited and she loved the Elizabethan Gardens at Manteo on Roanoke Island. At Colonial Williamsburg she was perfectly content to wander the many well-maintained gardens, chatting with and learning from staff gardeners and colonial interpreters. Here in town, there are several local historical preservation groups that maintain 18<sup>th</sup> century gardens as a part of their historical mission. Some of these sell the plants they grow.

## *Susie's Backyard Soup Kitchen*

Early in her gardening career Susan exhibited a love of all living things. Well, perhaps except for voles and slugs; as a flower gardener those two were detested pests. At her first house there wasn't much opportunity for her to follow birds and wildlife. But when we moved into the woods suddenly there was wildlife

everywhere. With that as inducement she busied herself making sure everyone had a meal.

Every morning an apple was placed out for the squirrels and bread crumbs for the turtles. We've seen raccoons, opossums, foxes, and the occasional deer. We kept a number of bird feeders. Their presence, in turn, attracts hawks and owls plus an occasional eagle, looking for prey. A pileated woodpecker sometimes calls from the deep woods.

With bird feeders, squirrels are a constant nemesis. Our feeders hung from shepherd's hooks, and the poles provided ready access to the feeders. We tried every style of baffle made, some more effective than others. On one pole we were forced to use double baffles, a cylinder on bottom and a wide cone on top. The trouble was, we lived in the woods, and there were plenty of low hanging limbs from which these long-tailed rats could launch themselves to the feeders, bypassing my system of baffles. Given the ready access to convenient limbs, many squirrels could make the jump. Susan called these specimens, "Olympic squirrels!"



*Prophetic hummingbird*

The only fail-safe solution was wire cages. We used a lot of these, but they were quite heavy and access was time-consuming. Thus, it was a constant struggle to maintain feeder placement such that the cages weren't needed. Sometimes we succeeded and sometimes the squirrels won, in which cases the cages remained in use.

Squirrels, of course, persisted no matter what the obstacle. Many times, we watched a squirrel shimmy up a pole and into the hollow bottom of a cylinder baffle. This never worked of course, but there was always a persistent one, hoping for a different outcome.

However, on one occasion we happened to catch the antics of the

most foolish squirrel of all time. It had rained heavily for many days and the ground was about as soggy as it can be without turning into quicksand. One unbalanced shepherd's hook eventually fell over. There it lay on the muddy ground, pole, baffle, feeder and all. Seed spilled out onto the muddy ground, a free meal for any squirrel who cared to partake.

A puzzled squirrel approached the uprooted bottom of the pole and stared at the new situation. Finally, it dutifully grasped the pole at the base and balanced itself as it walked carefully toward the hollow underside of the baffle. When it came to the overturned baffle it hesitated and then went in. Susan and I, watching from her kitchen



*Bird seed thief extraordinaire*

window, could hardly contain our laughter. At last, the squirrel emerged and with obvious disappointment hopped across the muddy yard and climbed the nearest tree, defeated by the new arrangement.

Susan loved bluebirds most of all, and she began raising them, a project that continued as long as she was physically able. That meant that in addition to feeders we needed nest boxes. There again we splurged. We usually had six on offer, scattered around the property. (There was also a bird bottle attached to the side of our garden house for wrens, but they preferred to scoot under the door of the structure and nest inside.) To feed them properly, she bought a mealworm house from which bluebirds could feed their babies once they hatched. It was an all-wood house-shaped affair specifically designed for bluebirds, although any bird smaller could gain admittance as well. Over the years we patched and repaired that feeder until it finally disintegrated. The plastic replacement was a waste of time; bluebirds wouldn't go near it.

For a decade or more she followed their exploits as successive Mr. and Mrs. Bluebirds built nests, laid eggs and incubated them, fed

them and then coached them as they fledged. If the mealworm supply should be temporarily exhausted, the parents would sometimes land on the screens of our storm windows to let us know that it was time to put more food on the table.

There came a time when our nest boxes seemed to be getting less activity than before. The bluebirds still came to the worm box just as frequently but they didn't stay after collecting a mouthful of worms. (Mrs. Bluebird was a dainty feeder, but Mr. Bluebird usually tried to stuff too many worms into his beak, to the point where for everyone he picked up he would drop two. It was fun to watch his struggles, although he would eventually fly off with what he had.



*Bird watching from garden glider*

But the mystery remained—where were they nesting. Then one day we noticed that a house a couple of doors away from us had feeders in their yard. Observation confirmed that our bluebirds were no longer resident but rather were simply dining out while living elsewhere. The thing we didn't understand was why. Our next boxes were the best money could buy, all wood construction with view port doors and clean-out doors, a roof overhang and a perch for landing. The bird houses down the street, on the other hand, were simply tin cans with holes cut in the side. Contrary to human logic, our bluebirds were living in the low rent district but taking advantage of Susan's hospitality for food.

The only explanation we could ever come up with was that that house had a more open yard—their trees were scattered much farther apart. Bluebirds often like to nest in open areas, perhaps because it seems to them less prone to forest predators.

The phase Susan liked best was when the young birds fledged. She would watch them with binoculars for hours as they flitted from tree top to tree top. The parents watched nearby, picking up worms from our feeder and carrying them to the fledglings. Soon, the parents were using their special call to summon the fledglings down to feed



*Mrs. Bluebird builds a nest*

themselves. It was comical to see a fledgling land on top of the worm box while a parent was inside, but then hesitate in confusion as they didn't yet understand how to get in.

Having taken on birds as boarders, Susan wasn't done. She began working on raccoons, turtles and stray cats. Since we always had cats of our own, it saved time and effort to leave something outside for them to snack on. But of course, there was nothing to stop a stray cat or raccoon from tipping in the feed dish.

Susan became interested in what was happening at night so I bought a trail camera and installed it where it could cover her main feeding location. The camera had a motion sensor so we only got images when something happened. The result was enlightening. Besides our cat, there were indeed raccoons, sometimes whole families of them. Interestingly, they were polite with each other, taking turns if things got crowded. Neighborhood cats sometimes stopped by and, surprisingly, the raccoons deferred to them. But there was more. Possums were a regular and occasionally we had a fox come through.

One day a box turtle wandered in while Susan was working in her garden. This occasioned her to welcome another forest denizen to her backyard soup kitchen. Crumbled bread suited them just fine. Then, a second turtle joined the first. Soon more arrived. In order to track them Susan painted marks on the back of each with bright

yellow fingernail polish. That first summer a total of six got their paint brand. One female had a missing foot, but she navigated just fine. Over the next few summers fewer and fewer visited until the injured female was the last one. Then, she too disappeared.

One day after Susan's health had started to decline a stray cat wandered up to our front porch. We had been putting out food for our own cat, Lucky, so there was something available for this newcomer. He reappeared occasionally, becoming an irregular regular. We named him George after another runaway that entered our yard a few times. George was sleek, healthy and polite. But his mere presence drove our own territorial cat bananas. When he came near she would hiss and yowl horrendously at the newcomer.



*Susan loved raising bluebirds*

Susan began sitting on the front porch when George came near, talking to him and encouraging him. Eventually he took a few steps inside the house, but he would never let us touch him. We found out that he made the rounds of the neighbors, cadging food from each. One day, he showed up with a front paw limp. Weeks later he had what appeared to be a severely damaged hindquarters, as if he had been hit by a car. Susan kept talking to him but he remained aloof, albeit a frequent tippler in our food supply

One day as Susan was sitting on the porch, enjoying the pleasant day and the view of her blooming flower garden, a small raccoon appeared from around the corner of the house. Its small size marked it as an immature raccoon, not yet an adult. It cautiously approached the porch and climbed the steps. Susan realized that the cat food bowl was directly beneath her chair. She held very still, waiting to see what it would do. Hesitantly, it stuck its nose over the top step and scooted

under the chair, there to help itself to the feed bowl contents.

Unfortunately, I chose that moment to open the front door in order to come out and sit with her—Susan's health was such that she liked me to sit with her as often as possible. Naturally this spooked the raccoon and it scooted away. Thereafter it would raid the food dish but never when Susan was sitting outside. I apologized for spoiling



*Raccoon raids cat food dish*

her intimate moment with the raccoon, but she dismissed it, letting it go as she always refused to resort to regrets over things that couldn't be helped. "No, that's OK; you couldn't have known."



Throughout our residence in our dream home Susan never tired of putting food out for both domestic and wild life and watching for new arrivals. Susan was an "observer of behavior," not a list maker. The idea of seeing something and adding it to a list, thereafter to dismiss it from further consideration, was anathema to her. She wanted to know everything about the life and times of our visitors, a habit that extended especially to birds. With the bluebirds she could recognize all their different calls. The same was true of other backyard song birds, including a resident wren who often sat on one of our porch flag poles and serenaded us at sunrise.

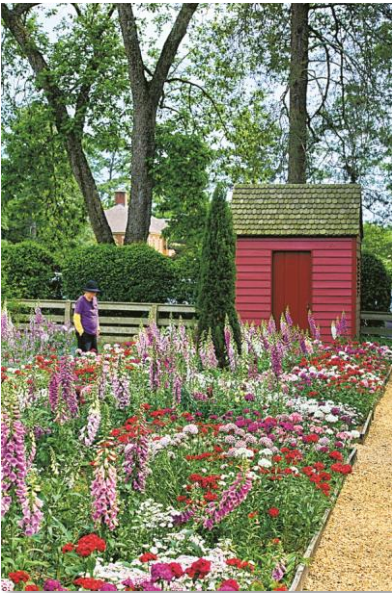
## *From Gardener to Designer*

Throughout the happy years of her retirement, while her health was still good, she did almost all the garden work herself, lacking only the digging of extra-large holes in packed soil. This included pulling weeds, a chore that no one likes. As such, she

developed quite firm ideas about how things should be done. But there came a time when health complications began to encroach. We will discuss those problems later but for now suffice it to say that she developed circulation problems in her legs that greatly sapped her strength and endurance.

As this condition gradually eroded her ability to maintain a garden that had become quite extensive, the weeding became less frequent and she slowly stopped planting new flowers and replenishing existing ones. I could see far sooner than she was willing to admit that she could no longer keep up. I began encouraging her to get help by hiring a landscape company to help her with new plantings and the never ending and ever onerous chore of weeding.

Such was her pride that she wouldn't hear of it. I think that besides the justifiable pride in her gardening skills she worried that no one



*Admiring a colonial garden*

else would do it right—a tendency to perfectionism that pervaded everything she did. She was right about that, of course, but as the weeds grew thicker and her condition prevented her from doing what she wanted she eventually relented.

Our first foray into garden maintenance was with a local landscaping firm that did landscaping, lawn maintenance, garden maintenance (the all-important weeding) and plantings. They told us that we must prepare for the first weeding by setting small flags in with any

plants we wanted to save. This should have been a warning red flag to Susan; it meant that their labor was basically unskilled in even the rudiments of plant gardening.

Unfortunately, Susan was still resisting the whole idea, and although I bought her an ample supply of flags, she simply could not bring

## Susie's Garden

herself to install the flags where needed. When the crew arrived, she simply walked around with the owner, pointing out what she wanted saved. She then retired into the house rather than staying to supervise. This was a disaster. Not only were there too many selections for the owner to remember but also most of the workers didn't get the benefit of her—or his—direction. As a result, prized plants that she had carefully nursed to happiness were devastated by the devouring swarms of unskilled laborers. The worst hit were valuable ground covers, plants that held a position of importance to her as a contrast to the taller clumps of blooming flowers.

Had she stayed outside disaster could have been averted. By the time the front yard was finished the result was utter devastation. She took one look before they broke for lunch, after which they were scheduled



*Susan loved working in her garden* to work on the back yard. She was so upset she could hardly restrain tears. Realizing the consequences of not putting flags out or supervising, she quickly marked everything important in the back yard.

## Susie's Garden

She also gave the owner a detailed assessment of what she thought of their gardening skills. We only ever tried them once more, this time to plant new material. This was the last straw. Given a list of what she wanted, the owner returned with plants that were, in almost every case, within the same plant family but inferior in variety, size and quality to what she had asked for. For example, instead of garden flox, a tall blooming plant comparable in size and beauty to



*Susan exchanges gardening for tea break and bird watching*

daisies, he planted ground flox, a pathetic little plant that was little more than a non-spreading ground cover. This was the final straw, and they were summarily dismissed.

But, maintenance problems remained, as did the need to replace annuals and replenish her huge array of flower pots, 39 in all in the final year. She then hired a regional landscape and nursery group—whose nursery outlets she visited often—but who also did garden maintenance. Since the grounds crews' jobs were exclusively tied to maintenance their crews were experienced in what to pull and what to leave alone. Their sales representative also understood the difference between garden flox and ground flox, to pick one example. She did have to school them on how to plant jonquil bulbs at one point, but they did it her way without protest.

She finally had a group she could work with, but it still wasn't ideal. They were a large company, and worked only through contracts signed in advance. They were expensive and they scheduled work far out in time, meaning that she couldn't always get them when she wanted. And, while they were much better than the previous local group, she eventually scaled back her requests of them. What she

## Susie's Garden

needed was a real garden helper, someone she could work with on a more frequent and closely supervised basis.



In the last couple of years, she finally found what she needed, an experienced gardener who was skilled in many other disciplines as well. She could reliably schedule him for two or three days a week to work at her direction, planting, weeding, mulching, fertilizing, trimming and all the myriad tasks that maintaining a garden entails.

The gardener contact came through a maid service company that Susan had found to do housecleaning for us. The owner ran her own



business and she was good, a hard and thorough worker who insisted that things be done right. She was a godsend for both Susan and I. Susan always insisted on high standards when she did housework herself, but her health would not permit it. Although I

*A gardener's work is never done*

did much of what was needed, what we really wanted was professional help and this company provided it.

The new gardener proved to be a good worker albeit totally unfamiliar with Susan's way of doing things. He had several gardening clients and his work undoubtedly fit their needs. But Susan was different—as a highly experienced and knowledgeable shade gardener she knew what she wanted and how it should be done. His first efforts left Susan unhappy and frustrated. The chief problem was that he often reverted to what worked for other clients or did what he thought should be done rather than what Susan specifically asked for.

A pair of examples illustrate the problem. Susan asked him to trim

dead limbs from her Japanese Rose plants, an annual spring task that helped preserve a fresh appearance. He did an outstanding job of



doing what was asked—and then began trimming dead limbs from her nearby oak leaf hydrangeas. When confronted, he said, puzzled, I thought you would want me to do that too.

*Susan's prized Oak Leaf Hydrangeas*

The hydrangeas featured in another misunderstanding. We had bought a couple of large bags of mulch, and she asked him to sprinkle a light layer of mulch under the hydrangeas, just enough to barely cover the ground. Instead, he spread the entire two 3 cu ft bags under a total of five plants and a few others nearby. This got him roundly scolded and left Susan quite unhappy. Finally, she sat down and considered the problem rationally.

First and foremost, she had to have garden help, and he was a meticulous worker. The problem was, nothing in his past experience prepared him to do things Susan's way. Therefore, he had to be taught—and in the process he needed close supervision. Her solution was as ingenious as it was simple and effective—for both of them as it turned out. She decided to sit with him while he worked, explaining not just what was needed but also why.



*Susan watering her flowers*

## Susie's Garden

This conferred a double benefit. Not only did he learn much about gardening, knowledge he could apply to other clients, and not only did the job finally get done to Susan's satisfaction, but also Susan herself was now outside with her beloved garden, no longer doing the work herself but at least enjoying the outdoor air, watching her designs and creations emerge at her direction. The time together provided a vital conversation outlet with another gardener.

As a result, she went from a state of continual frustration to that of a very happy garden designer. They became fast friends, enjoying each other's company in a way not possible before she turned her active mind to solving a hitherto intractable problem—something she was good at her entire life.

By the time she became ill and had to enter the hospital she was able to tell him, in words he later related to me, "The garden is the best it has ever looked." High praise indeed from a woman who never accepted second best. I have since assured him that I want him to



Susan's backyard place of refuge continue maintaining "Susie's Garden" as a tribute to her. Together we will do our best to keep Susan's gardening tradition alive. Our daughter has agreed to help out as well—although it will never again benefit from the life-giving Michelangelo touch of its creator.

## Susie's Garden

It can truly be said of Susan that she lived her philosophy of “daisies, daffodils and kitty cats” to the fullest measure, true to herself to the end. She was a child of nature, a woman of whom Shakespeare might have written, as he did of Julius Caesar,

*Her life was gentle and the elements so mixed in her that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, ‘This was a woman.’*

## Susie's Garden

# *Cats, Bats and Underground Rats*



*God created the cat so that humans could  
experience the pleasure of caressing a tiger*  
— Joseph Mery

*The smallest feline is a masterpiece*  
— Leonardo da Vinci

*Never try to outstubborn a cat*  
— Robert A. Heinlein

**S**oon after we were married, my wife announced her philosophy of life. It was to be “Daisies, daffodils and kitty cats!” It seemed certain that our shared lives would be filled with furry, purring creatures.

We had a total of five cats during our 55 years together and Susan loved them all. Each was cared for, fed, petted, taken to the vet for shots, and generally allowed run of the house and yard.

The first was our orange tabby, Tigger, brought home by Susan soon after we moved into our first house. He moved with us to our second

house, the Williamsburg colonial style house on our hill. There then began a process of feline accretion whereby various cats chose us for residency, increasing our total population to four. During this time, our daughter, who had had a gerbil and a hamster in our previous house, added a tropical fish tank and a dog, the latter a Brittany spaniel named Jenny.

Meanwhile, our daughter had moved on to horses so care of the fish fell to Susan. Nor was she an unwilling custodian. As she was with all things, she cared for our pet zoo with affection, diligence and thoroughness. Years later, after the fish, dog and the first wave of cats had all departed to pet heaven, we were blessed with one more cat, this one a tortoiseshell female foundling with an attitude.

This is their story.

## *The Vole Patrol*

Jigger, our first cat, was the titular leader of the Vole Patrol but he was never the paws-on-the-ground commander. That duty fell to a black tuxedo cat named Katie.

Garden aficionados will immediately understand that the “underground rats” of the chapter title are in reality voles. These tiny burrowing rodents, visibly distinguishable from field mice by their short stubby tails, terrorize any garden where they gain a foothold. While moles may tear up garden soil with their tunnels, they do not harm plants. Instead, they eat small grubs and insects, a welcome habit that helps gardeners excuse the little mounds they leave behind. Voles, on the other hand, dine on the underground parts of flowers, a habit that makes them public enemy number one to gardeners.

Susan's flower garden became thus infested, and she fought a mighty battle against them for years, putting small rocks in the holes where she planted new bulbs—the rocks supposedly hurt vole feet. Once, when she was taking a break from digging in the dirt, sitting on her garden glider sipping tea and reading a novel, she noticed that one of her Hosta leaves was wiggling. Since there was no wind, this demanded investigation. She went to the plant and reached for the

curiously motile leaf.

It came away in her hand. A vole had eaten everything below ground, leaving only the leaf and stalk behind. Thus, the arrival of a platoon of vole marauding felines was a blessing.



Years after we moved to our dream house on a hill, when our daughter was in elementary school, a small black-and-white female tuxedo kitten followed her home from school one day. It was a pitiful little thing, obviously lost, or possibly abandoned by someone, and in immediate need of food and water and a little care and kindness. We took it in, and our daughter immediately fell in love with it as it had clearly adopted her as its protector. We debated what to do, because the kitten looked healthy and therefore almost certainly had an owner.

Finally, we decided to place a lost-and-found ad in the newspaper and an announcement on the local radio station, asking for claimants to contact us. Our very mature daughter understood the decision—even though she wanted to keep the kitten. She realized that there might



*Katie snoozes with her adopted protector*

be some other child out there at that moment missing it and wishing for its return as much as she wished to keep it.

The next day a very young and quite delighted little girl called to

claim the kitten. Brimming with the faith and clarity of childhood, she described the waif in detail. "That's my kitten!" she said in a tiny but firm and emphatic voice. "She wandered away, and I'm so glad you found her. I'll tell my Daddy, and we'll come get her as soon as he gets home," she added, with utter faith in a quick reunion with her

beloved kitten. We promised to have the little black-and-white fur ball ready and hung up.

But neither Daddy nor little girl showed up, that afternoon or ever, confirming our suspicion that Daddy was the villain of the piece. Likely, he had dumped the kitten far from home and then made up a fake story about the kitten wandering off and becoming lost.

There's no way to know the inner workings of that other household, but one thing is certain; that is no way to treat a child.

In any case, that's how Katie came to live with us. And, that's how the Vole Patrol was born. Because Katie was the most relentless vole hunter that ever lived.

She got along fine with all of our cats, and, in fact, with all the cats in the neighborhood § except for one. Eventually, another tuxedo cat moved into a house a few doors away. This drove Katie



bonkers. Every time this

*doppelgänger*

showed up in our yard, Katie was out the door like a flash and after this threat to her special place in our home. Katie was a bit plump, and the imposter cat was younger and more fit, but no

*Jenny is introduced to a skeptical Tigger*

matter. He would not, *must not* be allowed to steal her place in our affections!

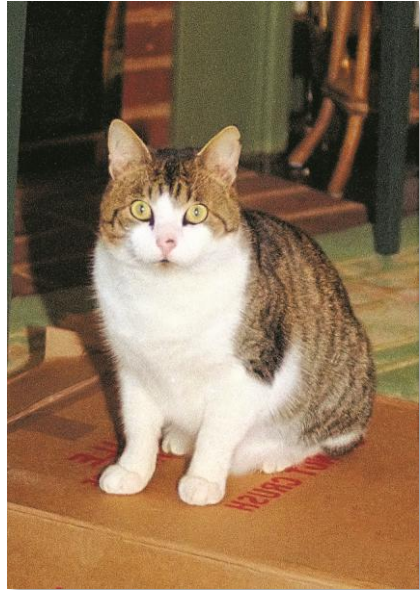


Katie was but one of many animals that our daughter befriended as she grew up. Eventually she was ready to move up to the frenemy of all cats—a dog. Having expressed a desire for one, and having

researched the idea herself, we set out one day to visit a lady with a litter of Brittany Spaniel puppies. I had a Cocker Spaniel myself growing up, so I was delighted with her choice— Brittany dogs are a beautiful breed, both in form and function, having been bred as hunting dogs. As such, they are alert, active and eager to please. Just the thing for a young lady discovering herself.

We brought a pup home, immediately christened Jenny. Naturally the cats were wary of this bouncing, energetic new addition—they avoided her whenever possible. Jenny grew and prospered in her new home, and all was well for a while. And then one day the inevitable happened—that which must happen where there are cats and dogs under the same roof.

We heard a hiss and a yelp. We all came running to see what had transpired. There was no cat to be seen, but Jenny stood there with a hurt look in her eyes, looking to us for sympathy. We took one look at her and had to laugh. For, on her nose were three perfectly spaced vertical claw scratches. She had finally gotten too close, no doubt wanting to play, and one of our cats (we suspect Katie!), taking offense at the audacity of such familiarity, had given her a striped nose for her presumption. The nose eventually healed but from that day forward Jenny knew who to avoid.



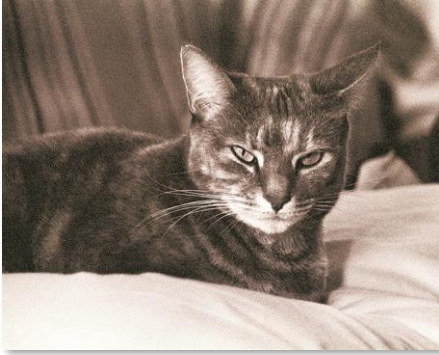
*Thomas Aquinas, Noted  
Philosopher*



The next member of our cat family was a tiny, odd looking little fellow who in reality belonged next door. He was a small but plump little tomcat of uncertain provenance, partly white but with faint brown stripes and a white undercarriage; he looked like he had been cobbled

together from parts of two cats.

The neighbors didn't allow their pets indoors, and I guess he noticed that there were well-fed felines coming and going at all hours at our house. So, by-and-by he showed up and began sampling the feed



*Abby the Tabby*

bowls along with Tigger and Katie. He was such an innocuous little fellow that hardly anyone noticed, and soon he became, nominally, our cat. There was an advantage to the arrangement—the neighbor was our vet and he offered free care although he was still, on paper, the little cat's owner. Who could refuse!

He was the gentlest, purest soul that I can ever remember encountering, man or beast, and our daughter named him Thomas Aquinas Noted Philosopher. He would sit in my lap for hours, even when other cats were there. The most empathetic of our cats, he adopted our autistic son as his guardian. When he developed a fatal internal blockage and had to be put down, we were all sad. The vet, his original owner, was so distraught that he could not perform the necessary service and had to delegate the heartbreaking task to someone else in his office. Thomas lies buried in one of our flower gardens, and his quiet, gentle purr is a memory that will live on with me forever.



*Thomas stands watch*



The final addition to the Vole Patrol arrived from no one knows where. A gray tabby just wandered in one day, liked the food, shelter

and companionship, and decided to stay. Abigail, as we named her, was a constant sidekick and silent partner for Katie on the hunt. Together, they *were* the Vole Patrol. We never knew which one did the pouncing, but it was always Katie who brought the catch back to devour on our patio, leaving the inedible parts behind for us to clean up.

For years, these four cats shared our home and our lives and gave us much pleasure. At any one time, one or more of them could be found in my lap in my recliner. And once, all four managed to find places to nestle up there.

They are all gone now. The Vole Patrol is but a fond memory. Our current cat, Lucky, is, like Katie, a silent and efficient hunter, and every bit as successful. And sometimes in a reflective moment, I let my mind wander and wonder what it would have been like if Katie and Lucky had been contemporaries. Talk about a hunting pair! We could make a fortune leasing them out to flower gardeners!

### *Flying squirrel*

We were accustomed to our tuxedo cat, Katie, the Vole Patrol's chief huntress, bringing home all manner of varmints from her hunting outings. But one day she came home with her most unusual catch yet—a flying squirrel. Our daughter happened to be outside and saw what Katie



*Vole Patrol brings home flying squirrel*

had so she was able to extract the little critter before Katie did too much damage. This was lucky for the squirrel because Katie always ate her catches on our patio, leaving the revolting inedible parts behind for us to clean up.

Susan was fascinated by the squirrel and took it in immediately for

care and nurturing. She built a nest for it in one of our dining room corner cabinets and fed it milk from an eyedropper until it recovered. Under her ministrations, it soon perked up and was ready for action.



*Susan's boneless cat*

It quickly bonded with Susan and became devoted to her. She delighted in carrying it around on her shoulder or in a shirt pocket everywhere she went in the house.

It became quite active as it regained its strength. It was born to fly, or rather glide, because they don't really fly, so it had to exercise that instinct. It would hop and flutter to a window, thence to climb up a curtain to the top. Susan would stand at the far end of the room and call to the little creature whereupon it would spread its arm and leg connecting membranes and launch itself toward her. It never

missed, landing on her shoulder, with a touch as light as a feather.

The National Wildlife Federation states that a flying squirrel can cover as much as 150 feet in a single glide, obviously from the starting vantage of a very tall tree. So, a room-size glide was no challenge. As she did with ever other living thing she loved, she cared for and devoted herself to this unique wild animal that had turned into a pet.

Unfortunately, her cherished flying squirrel came to an unfortunate end at the hands of her husband. The flying squirrel lived on the first floor and none of us knew that it had any interest in the upstairs. After all, the only access was via a flight of hardwood stairs and the little beastie certainly couldn't glide uphill. However, apparently it could hop up the stairs.

I went into the upstairs bath one day, to discover the squirrel floating in the toilet, drowned. Yours truly had left the lid up and it had chosen a bad spot to quench its thirst.

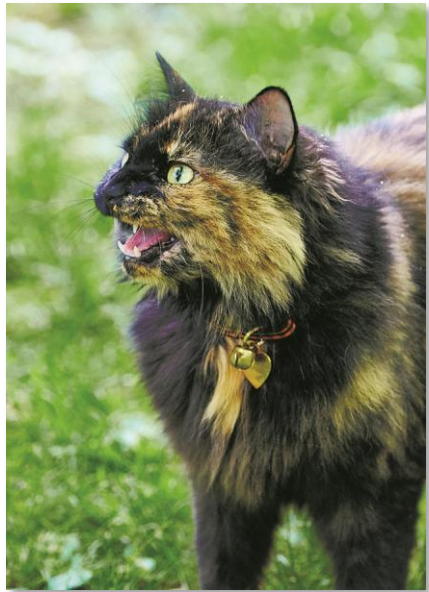
Susan didn't speak to me for a long time after that. I offered to buy her another flying squirrel; they are available commercially as pets, although state laws vary. Susan flatly turned down the offer and I don't blame her—it wouldn't have been the same. She never spoke of the incident again, but I know she was deeply hurt by it. Needless to say, the toilet lid was never left up again but it was too late.

## *Lady With an Attitude*

Our longhair tortoiseshell cat was a rescued feral newborn, abandoned by its mother in our back yard. (Like calicos, the tortoiseshell morph is a unique female-only feline anomaly with a reputation for "attitude.") The mother had a litter that included four or five torties, and for many days she moved them around among several yards in our neighborhood before finally abandoning this one practically on our doorstep. The rest grew up wild, occasionally appearing in our back yard as yearlings, and then disappearing altogether.



Susan first became aware of Lucky because she was crying desperately from hunger and thirst outside our living room window. Rescue was never in question because Susan loved every living thing, cats especially. Susan chose the name Lucky because Lucky was lucky to have been abandoned at the home of one of the most dedicated cat-loving families in the neighborhood. At first, because she was feral, we were going to keep her outside so we arranged a box for her with a water bowl and feed dish. That lasted one night and then fear that hawks or night denizens might get her brought her inside.



*Yo! Bird! Come down here and fight like a cat*

## Susie's Garden

Although now with a home, Lucky had been born wild, and as a result she had an inbred need to be outside to hunt and explore even as a kitten. We let her out when she cried at the door but kept a close eye on her, concerned that she might be hawk bait. She was all over our yard and the surrounding woods. And then it happened—despite our



best efforts, one day the little kitten disappeared.

Susan was devastated. I had never seen her so distraught. She walked through the woods by the hour, calling Lucky's name plaintively, becoming more desperate with each passing hour. Anyone who thought Susan's calm demeanor and solitary periods betokened a lack of emotion was seriously mistaken—the fire seethed and burned deep within her, emerging only in times of extreme emotional duress. She simply had such

*Lucky strands herself!*

firm self-control that she kept it hidden until stress forced it into the open.

We searched into the night with flashlights. The next day my wife was out again, this time a tone of desperation in her voice that I'd never heard before. For hours success eluded us. Our daughter and I watched Susan from the window as she refused to give up, calling Lucky's more desperately with each passing hour. Finally, after we had virtually given Lucky up as lost to a hawk Susan caught sight of her in the window of our garage, sitting on a stored ladder and peering out at us. Her curiosity had led her into the garage unnoticed and she had become trapped there.



Tortoiseshell cats are not a breed but rather a genetic coat patten and

## Susie's Garden

color variation—generally black, yellow-gold and orange. They are known for their lively, distinct and high energy personalities, an attitude that is often referred to as "tortitude." Although no rule is without exceptions and many experts discount the idea of unique tortoiseshell behavior, torties are often perceived as "strong-willed, a bit hot-tempered, and . . . very possessive of their human" as well as "fiercely independent, feisty and unpredictable." This complex of behaviors together with their graceful elegance makes them adored by all who have been lucky enough to share their lives with a tortie.



Until she got older, she never used the litter box, always letting us know when it is time to go outside. To announce that she wants in she knocks on the thumb latch of the front door handle. In the summer, when clearances are looser, she can open the door herself. Oddly, when she wants out, she would ignore Susan and search me out, meowing for service. One



*Walking the plank*

Christmas Susan placed a strip of bells on the inside doorknob. Soon she was ringing the bells to announce her wish to go out. She has learned to trick me into feeding her by ringing the bells. When I show up to let her out, she turns toward our kitchen and her feed bowl.

We first learned of her tree climbing skills when she was just past kitten stage. Two Labradors came bounding into our back yard one afternoon. Terrified, Lucky levitated up the nearest oak tree. Long after the dogs had been shooed away, she remained there, unwilling to move. I had to climb a ladder to retrieve her. However, she's not afraid of much else.

## Susie's Garden

Another time, two deer showed up in our back yard. She went into a crouch and began stalking them. Amazingly, the deer took one look at her and retreated. She is a persistent and successful hunter, with a tendency to bring "gifts" inside after she's caught them.

When she was young, she used a tree near our garage to get onto the garage roof, thence to jump to the roof of our covered breezeway. Once there, in typical cat fashion she preferred to be rescued rather than get down herself. We keep a long 2X4 handy for the purpose, and she "walks the plank" down from the roof to safety.



Another time, bats came to roost outside the louvers of our garage ventilation vent. Ever curious about the garage, she jumped onto one of our cars, thence to leap to the door opener drive box and then to the roof trusses in order to investigate the bats.

The spooky flying mammals are long since gone, but for years afterward she would sneak into the garage to check if they were still around. Once again, our 2X4 serves as a rescue pathway. Not to be thwarted by absence of bats from the garage, however, she has taken matters into her own paws. She now catches bats on the wing right out of the air in the dark of night. She long ago started bringing live catches into the house for show-and-tell—bats included. You can imagine the chaos that ensues after she placed one at our feet and it became airborne. One evicts them with extreme caution—Lucky's shots are up to date but ours are not.

# The Island at the End of the Road



*Beautiful land across the waters*  
— The Accomack Indian name  
for Chincoteague Island



For years we had vacationed at Nags Head and while it was enjoyable, over time we began to sense a lack of variety. Thus, we were ready for a change. In 1990 Susan made perhaps the most important vacation suggestion she ever offered to us—she asked that we switch our summer trip to Chincoteague Island and Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, located on Assateague Island, an outboard barrier island on the Atlantic Ocean



*Susan's love of wild geese began here*

## Susie's Garden

side of Chincoteague. Her reason for the suggestion was very personal. She said that as a young girl she had spent many happy summers at her grandparents' home where she first discovered the joy of watching wild geese up close.

When her grandparents moved into their retirement home and farm they added a pond as a swimming attraction for grandchildren. The pond was also a magnet for geese and ducks. She would follow geese from nearby corn fields to the pond and then toss corn and bread to them. For a highly intelligent and sensitive young girl it was a uniquely rewarding way to interact with wild creatures up close.



*My first Chincoteague Wildlife Refuge photo*

I suspect it also had a strong formative effect on her overall nature-loving personality.

The Eastern Shore wildlife refuge was a way of getting back in touch with those happy childhood times.

There was an additional benefit for our horse loving daughter. Assateague Island was the home of the famous Assateague wild ponies, celebrated in Marguerite Henry's *Misty of Chincoteague*. The history of their origins is clouded in mystery. According to the National Park Service,

*Local folklore describes the Assateague horses as survivors of a shipwreck off the Virginia coast. While this dramatic tale of struggle and survival is popular, there are no records yet that confirm it. The most plausible explanation is that they*

*are the descendants of horses that were brought to barrier islands like Assateague in the late 17th century by mainland owners to avoid fencing laws and taxation of livestock.*

As a sometimes recorder of family life, I leapt at the chance to photograph wild creatures for the first time. Since birds are small and flighty this would require a telephoto lens, gear I did not own at the time. In order to justify a rather expensive purchase I told Susan that my eyesight was fading and manual focusing was becoming problematic—conveniently ignoring the fact that I wore corrective glasses. Therefore, I just *must* have a new autofocus camera for the trip as well as a compatible telephoto lens. She didn't try to talk me out of it although she must have known that I just wanted a new toy.

Thus, the change of venue was ideal for each of us. Little did any of us realize at the time how much this change of vacation destination would change our lives. From the first visit on, a June trip to Chincoteague became an annual event, rarely missed.

## *The First Year*

**T**he first year, 1990, was magic. We began our journey after work and school, causing us to arrive at the turnoff from Route 13 to Chincoteague Road as the sun was going down. It is a ten-mile drive from there to Chincoteague, and the approach passes a NASA facility on the way in. There's a big sweeping left hand curve, followed by a long straight stretch along NASA's boundary fence on the left and their visitor center on the right. Then comes another big sweeping curve, this time to the right. Suddenly Queen Sound and its marsh environs are revealed, and beyond it, across the causeway, lights twinkling in the gathering twilight—Chincoteague village!



*Daughter makes a new friend*

## Susie's Garden

As we crossed the Queen Sound causeway the cares of the world seemed to slip away and we were transported into an exotic, magical place in a land that time forgot. Along the causeway, the water often laps right up to the edge of the road at high tide and the marshes on both sides are crowded with all manner of bird life. There's nothing quite like it.

That first trip we were so excited that we drove straight through town, across the Assateague Channel causeway and bridge and onto Assateague Island. The road into the refuge, Beach Road, which



on the left  
Little Tom's  
right. The  
deepening  
and there  
evening fog  
Cars

terminates at the Atlantic, twists and turns through woodlands and past marshes until one suddenly emerges to another causeway, this one spanning the watery gap to the

beach between the Swan Cove impoundment and salt water Cove on the twilight was as we arrived was a bit of over both coves. returning from

*Got one!*

the beach had their headlights on and it was as if we had been transported into another world, a more serene and natural, even mystical one.

Up ahead, we saw a Canada goose mom and dad keeping watch over several downy babies. This was what Susan had come for.

“Stop the car,” she exclaimed excitedly.

I pulled off onto the grass verge and we got out, Susan and our daughter with binoculars and I fumbling with my new camera. Soon enough I was ready, and my very first refuge photo was of that little goose family group. I was enthralled by the experience, as were both Susan and daughter. If there were ever any doubts about the wisdom

of Susan's choice of destination they dissolved and dissipated in the twilight fog cloaking the causeway.

We had rented a channel-side condo room, and we spent every hour possible at the refuge. Between trips to the refuge, Susan and our daughter tossed bread to gulls from our second-floor balcony. Susan laughed joyously as the avian aerialists jockeyed frantically for free air and opportunity. She had found something she could abandon herself to in the moment, and she never tired of the experience.



*Fitted out for bird watching*

The refuge was everything we had hoped for and more. Our daughter found her wild ponies. For years she made friends with mare and foal alike. Susan followed goose families up and down the drainage channels next to Beach Road, right up until declining health kept her away permanently.

For me, it was snowy egrets. For all of us as a family, Chincoteague had become The Island at the End of the Road.

## *Egret Herder*

Snowy egrets were almost hunted to extinction in the late 1800s, their breeding feathers prized as adornments for ladies' fashion hats. Thankfully, early conservation laws, inspired by activists Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall, helped save them from the fate of the dodo. Their efforts also inspired the creation of the National Audubon Society. In 1913, Congress passed the Migratory Bird Act, a landmark bill law that banned market hunting and outlawed

interstate transport of birds.<sup>2</sup>

On first sight this stylish little wader instantly became my favorite. With my first look thorough the viewfinder I was hooked on bird photography, a love that continues to this day.



*Sometimes you get lucky. . .*

Egrets soon became something of an obsession. Although I chased them all over the island my favorite spot was a pool along Beach Road, formed where the roadside channel from Swan Cove empties into a culvert that drains excess water from Swan Cove into Little Tom's Cove during the rainy season. Egrets and herons congregate there to fish, and until fishermen discovered the spot it was always productive when the morning sun rose above the tree line. I immediately dubbed it Egret Alley, and for years it was my go-to location.

One has to develop skills to approach a bird close enough to get an artistically satisfying frame-filling image. After all, birds can fly—and they do. It took me quite a while to learn how to approach without spooking them into flight.

My first solution was to have Susan act as an assistant. We would locate a possible subject and then I would set up with tripod and camera some distance away. Susan would make a wide detour around the bird and then very slowly saunter back toward the egret from the opposite direction. Birds have a keep-out comfort zone, and if she approached slowly and quietly enough, the bird would sometimes move slowly away from her rather than taking flight in

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<sup>2</sup> *"How Two Women Ended the Deadly Feather Trade," Smithsonian Magazine, 2013; "The Comeback of the Snowy Egret and its Inspiration for the Comeback of the Indian River Lagoon,"*

order to maintain the required separation. Soon, it would move right into my viewfinder.

As a result, Susan became known as “Egret Herder.” For her part, this seemed a bit too much, and she described the object of my obsession as “the damned white bird!”

Susan's choice to pursue the joy of her childhood memories gave me the gift of an avocation that has never grown old. I owe her for many things, and bird photography is one that never ceases to give pleasure and a sense of accomplishment. The times when I am behind the camera trying to get close to a bird are among the few moments now when I can escape, albeit temporarily, the loss of her presence, her love, her perpetually smiling face and her mischievous personality. In the past, every time I captured a special image, I wanted to immediately share it with her—her appreciation of my efforts always served as a tonic, sending me back for more. Now, there is no one to share with.



*Off duty Egret Herder relaxes*

## *Family Fun*

Our daughter almost always accompanied Susan on refuge treks, often without me as I was off somewhere looking for egrets with my camera. We had two sets of binoculars, so they both could birdwatch together. Sometimes our daughter took my old manual focus camera. While she wasn't quite the photography enthusiast I was, she nevertheless had a good eye for subject choice and composition. Among her best efforts were a sunrise silhouette of Susan with spotting scope and a backlit fishing great egret.

Susan also had an excellent eye for composition, and she would often

ask me to compose a scene a certain way. Her suggestions were always spot on. As far as subject interpretation, at the refuge she wanted photographs of bird in habitat or engaged in activity that exhibited typical bird behavior, not an artsy close-up portrait.

She sometimes asked why I took so long to compose a shot, to the point that, for example, geese flying through a scene were exiting the frame when the shutter fired—as happened during an unfortunate sunrise silhouette at Black Duck Pool. Even the teaching pro at the one workshop I attended pointed out the obvious—but Susan, the non-photographer, had seen it first.

Most years our family trip was in June but there were exceptions. One spring Susan had a committee meeting on Eastern Shore and by one of those rare coincidences I had a job-related conference at the

Chincoteague Convention Center. This was a rare opportunity for just the two of us. Another year, we went Thanksgiving week in November. The advantage of this week is that the Wildlife Loop is open all day; during the rest of the year, it only opens after 3 PM. The all-day schedule is a big plus because that week also occurs during waterfowl migration season. If we hit it lucky, snow geese would also be passing through.



*Scanning the refuge for birds*

During one Thanksgiving visit, I had the good fortune to discover a mated pair of bald eagles nesting in a stand of pine trees between the Wildlife Loop and Black Duck Pool. Although they were quite a distance from the Loop, a telephoto lens produced results. By pure chance, I happened to catch the male returning to the nest with a large pine bough for incorporation into their nest. There was just time to swing the camera around and fire off two images, one with wings up and another with wings down. As

mentioned earlier, sometimes you get lucky.

Another excuse for off season trips was the fact that for a time I served as regional coordinator for a nature photography web community. In this role, I planned photography outings to several places, among them the Shenandoah mountains, Barnegat Light in New Jersey and, of course, Chincoteague. These outings were family affairs, and Susan came along on the Chincoteague visits. Her outgoing personality was a big assist to me in keeping everyone entertained once the day's photography was over.

## *Optical Disaster*

For the first couple of decades, we visited the refuge as often as possible during our stays. While I was off chasing birds with my camera, Susan, often with daughter in tow, wandered the trails

looking for goose families and any other bird life. Her favorite was the Black Duck Trail, a paved and partially wooded walk connecting Beach Road with the Wildlife Loop. This trail was useful because the Wildlife Loop was closed before 3 PM most of

the year. Black Duck Trail was a scenic path to the Wildlife Loop earlier in the day. The solitude and peacefulness of the trail and the loop suited Susan's preference exactly.



*Bald eagle with nesting material*

From the beginning she carried binoculars. She also had a tripod mounted spotting scope when she chose to use it. Later, I bought her a high-end European-brand spotting scope and a set of image stabilized binoculars. Equipped with these, she could admire bird

plumage from afar. Susan always checked the price of my gifts to her, and she was a discerning critic when it came to how she was treated. It had taken me a long time to overcome the enforced frugality of my upbringing, but with these purchases we were finally settling arrears. Since both the spotting scope and the image stabilized binoculars were *very* expensive, she was quite pleased that she had received her due!

The scope met an unfortunately and untimely end on first use. My first inkling came as I was looking for birds near Black Duck Trail. I saw the pair in the distance, coming from the direction of the Wildlife Loop. When they saw me, they stopped and assumed a pose. Odd, I thought.



*Susan and daughter with spotting scopes; only one is intact, the other is in pieces*

When they reached me, Susan held up the scope sheepishly, revealing that it had broken in half. She was clearly worried about my reaction, but she tried to hide it behind her usual lighthearted demeanor.

“What happened?” I asked, trying to mask my negative reaction. After all, this was very expensive gear.

“It fell off the tripod and broke,” she admitted, still trying to affect nonchalance as a way of deflecting the unhappiness of the situation.

“Hmm. Let me look at it.” I took the now useless scope and tripod from her. A careful examination followed, of both scope and tripod. At the end of my scrutiny, I shook my head and said, “This isn’t your fault. I installed it wrong on the tripod. It is a heavy scope and it wasn’t tightened down enough to keep it from unscrewing itself with repeated use and tossing it across your shoulder to carry.”

She looked greatly relieve. I added, "I'll contact the manufacturer and see if it can be repaired. I'm sorry this happened, but unfortunately the two of you will have to share the older scope for the remainder of the trip."

When we got home, I made arrangements to send the scope off to the manufacturer's American headquarters, being careful to explain what happened and make clear that it wasn't the scope's fault. A week later a brand-new spotting scope appeared—and there was no invoice for repairs in the package. I immediately called again and asked about the shipment. The very kind gentleman on the other end laughed and replied, "It's all part of our service. Enjoy your new scope."

Wiser but no longer sadder, I made sure thereafter that that scope was tightened down on the tripod securely enough to defy the circus strong man. Susan used the scope happily for years before she tired of lugging its weight on her rambles off the beaten path. The binoculars, on the other hand, remained with her until she could no longer go to the island because of declining health and strength.



*Chilly day on the Wildlife Loop with husband's photography group*

## *Susie's Birds*

On one of her jaunts, Susan returned to describe perhaps the most beautiful bird she had ever seen at the refuge. She was walking the Black Duck Trail and she happened to glance at a tree along the walk. There, perched on a limb, sat a male wood duck in full breeding plumage. I have only ever been able to photograph the female, but the male is incredibly colorful, and I could only envy her

good fortune while wishing I had been with her.

On another occasion I was chasing egrets at one of the channels alongside the beach road when I noticed her at the entrance to Black Duck Trail. She was calling and motioning to me frantically. I headed that way, to find a rare tableau in a little pool at the end of the roadside channel. She had found a black crowned night heron swallowing a large frog, head first. I arrived as the night heron had ingested the head; the rest of the body, including both front and back legs dangled to the water. The frog was almost as long as the bird!



*Black-crowned night heron devours frog*

But Susan's favorite activity was the one she began with as a girl all those years ago, following goose families around the island and observing their habits and their family ways. There was always a "watcher goose," usually a male, who keep a close eye on anything that might become a threat while mom and babies grazed nearby. Here at the refuge, she was also treated to an occasional swan family.

Canada Geese, the most prevalent species at the refuge, are monogamous and very family oriented. Family groups stay together



*Mama goose and children*

and sometimes related family groups forage and bed down in close contact, not quite intermingled but nearby as little clusters of family groups.

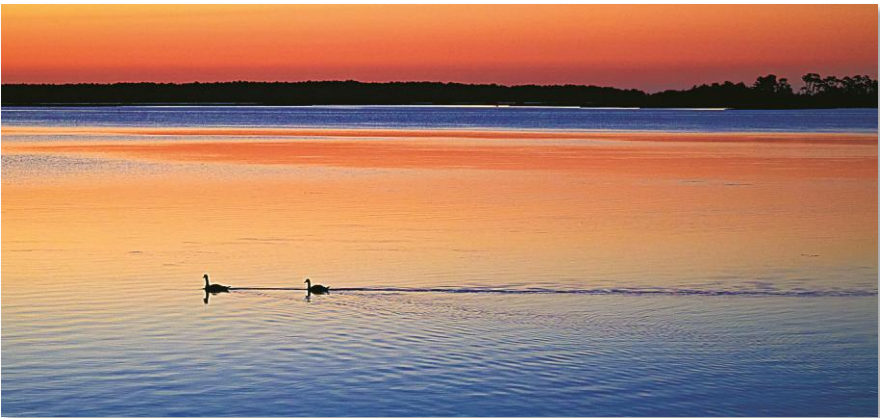
This fascinated Susan, and she could be seen walking along one of the channels

bordering Beach Road, calling to the geese as they swam along.

“You’re a pretty goose, yes you are, you’re lovely. And your babies are pretty too. You are a good mother, Mama Goose.” This was the gentle, nature loving side of the complex woman I loved.

I don’t know what they thought of Susan, but they were never afraid of her. When she followed them and talked to them, they were well aware of her presence but they didn’t try to get away. They might hurry a bit as they passed, leaving little wakes behind to mark their path, but they never took to wing.

Then, she discovered that there were large Canada goose families in the waters around our Oyster Bay rental house. They made a practice of taking a morning swim back and forth along the shoreline. Susan watched for them every day, bread crumbs at the ready. A dock made an ideal perch for her to lure geese to her, as eager as gulls for a free meal. This interaction with wildlife was perhaps the one thing that gave her the purest joy in life—although it might have been a close thing to working in her flower garden.



*Morning swim on Oyster Bay*

## *Village Diversions*

**G**n the early years we spent as much time as possible at the refuge, but we always made time to take advantage of the shopping, dining, cultural possibilities and recreational diversions as possible

## Susie's Garden

as well as just relaxing at our rental house. After our daughter married the annual visit became a family affair, initially with her husband and later with their son, our grandson. Once her family took up kayaking, they were off and paddling most mornings. Even Grandma took a ride in their two-seater.

One of the great pleasures of visiting a seashore village is the seafood. In the early years our favorite was Landmark Crab House, a wonderful seafood restaurant built over water on pilings. Sadly, the pilings eventually rotted out and the restaurant was torn down to make way for vacation rentals. While it was open for business it was our go-to choice for evenings out. Susan loved their sea scallops and our daughter was inclined to try everything. My favorite was a main course entre no one else offered, nor had I ever experienced it before. The feature was crab imperial (my all-time favorite) and country ham. The combination, in conjunction with an expansive salad bar, was the best meal I've ever had.

Shopping has always been a favorite with Susan and our daughter. Their first stop was always the Brant, an upscale clothing and trinket



*Mother and daughter bond by shopping*

shop on Maddox. The back room was devoted to clothing, and their styles matched well with the ladies' preferences. Susan bought many of her finest colorful and showy fashions there. Our daughter benefitted by proximity to her mother because Susan always bought her anything she wanted as mother-to-daughter gifts. This also included jewelry, wind chimes and other personal and household trinkets. For my part, I occasionally found a tee shirt or light jacket that worked.

Next in order of priority for the

shopping duo was Main Street. This drive through town center is lined on both sides with clothing, art and curio shops. Our first stop was always Decoys Decoys, the premier bird carving outlet on the island. Not surprisingly, several Eastern Shore decoy carvers are based at Chincoteague.



*Grandma does kayaks!*

Once Susan decided that decoys made good curio display items for our living room shelves our annual trips always included a stop there. Over the years we bought innumerable decoys of every description, from roughly finished primitives to birds with elaborate, finely etched feather detail. Our living room shelves are jam packed with decoys, but Susan never stopped. In her words, “I can always squeeze another one in.

On one of my last visits, after she had stopped going, I bought five carvings, four small ducks intended as gifts and an incredibly detailed bluebird perched on a limb and stand. Susan loved bluebirds as she had been raising them for more than a decade. But when she saw the duck carvings, she said emphatically, “I want them too.” Who can deny a woman something she wants? Not I. Other gifts were selected and distributed as appropriate.

There were plenty of shops along Main Street. Mother and daughter visited them all. In recent decades a curio shop called The Flying Fish became a favorite. Besides the usual beach town trinkets, they stocked some truly wonderful whimsical metalcraft items. Our favorite, of which Susan bought two, one for our flower garden and one for daughter's yard, was a delightfully rendered metal reproduction of an Audrey Two singing plant from *Little Shop of Horrors*.



In 2011 we discovered art that became an annual tradition. One of the most famous island attractions is the annual Assateague wild pony swim. The Chincoteague Fire Department owns rights to the band of wild ponies on the Virginia side of Assateague. The refuge limits the pony population so every July the “salt water cowboys” of the fire department round up the youngsters and drive them across

Assateague Channel to Chincoteague where they are auctioned off. The ponies and the annual swim were the subject of Margeurite Henry's children's book, *Misty of Chincoteague*. The book was made into a movie of the same name, filmed on the island.



*Minotaur launch from NASA, Wallops Island*

With this as background, in 2011 a local artist began creating colored pencil drawings depicting the swim in a whimsical way. These drawings are stuffed with little tidbits of local lore. There are always: ponies swimming the channel; the Assateague Light House; mosquitos (an island signature); a fish jumping out of

the water; three cats in various transport vehicles, including a flying saucer one year; a Snoopy look-alike in an air conveyance—balloon, airplane, etc.; and a monkey! We bought the first-year piece and had it framed in a colorful festive style. Every year thereafter we bought another, actually two, the second for our daughter, framed in the same style but in a variety of colors. The tradition ended with the 2024 drawing; the artist stopped working to provide care in a family health situation.

Twice we watched rocket launches from the nearby NASA facility on Wallops Island. The first time we came off the island and joined a huge early morning crowd at the NASA welcome center across the

road from one of NASA's mainland facilities. We were supposed to be given a countdown so everyone would know when to be on the watch and so photographers could be ready. But the launch was delayed and then it happened without warning. I barely got off a couple of dark frames showing only the red-orange exhaust plume before the column of flame was too far way.

The second incidence, a Minotaur launch, went better. We watched from our bayside rental house. When the Minotaur climbed about the surrounding houses, I was ready. Equipped with a longer lens



*Michael and Susan, Treasure Island, Florida 2008 (photo brother Ron M.)*

this time, I was able to get much better photographs. Because this launch was in the daytime, I was able to expose for both sky and rocket.

Over the years, we stayed at many rental homes. Susan's criteria were: it must be waterfront and it must have a screened-in porch. She delighted in sitting on the porch, sheltered from the island's ubiquitous mosquitos, sipping tea and reading one of her favorite detective novels.

Gradually we worked our way up the scale until we were renting very nice 3- and 4-bedroom houses. Eventually, we found our forever house, a perfectly situated sprawling house located on Oyster Bay, a placid body favored by oystermen sitting between Chincoteague and Assateague. The house had plenty of room inside to spread out and outside it had its own boat dock, ideal for kayak launches.

Susan loved the opportunity to interact with the island's gulls. She bought loafs of inexpensive bread, tore each slice into small bits and tossed them off the balcony to the gulls. She positively cackled with

## Susie's Garden

delight as they grabbed each bite in the air. If one made it to the ground, it was immediately mobbed.

One Thanksgiving we learned that the island's artists held an annual art and craft festival, named appropriately for the migration season, the Waterfowl Festival. We went and found plenty of things to buy.



*Susan at Selby Gardens, Sarasota Florida*

Susan spent quite a while admiring an expensive, beautifully rendered carving of a brant. She stewed for a long time before deciding to purchase it. Unfortunately, when we returned it had just sold. We were once again reminded that if you like something buy it then because you may never have the opportunity again

## *Birding and Bird Photography*

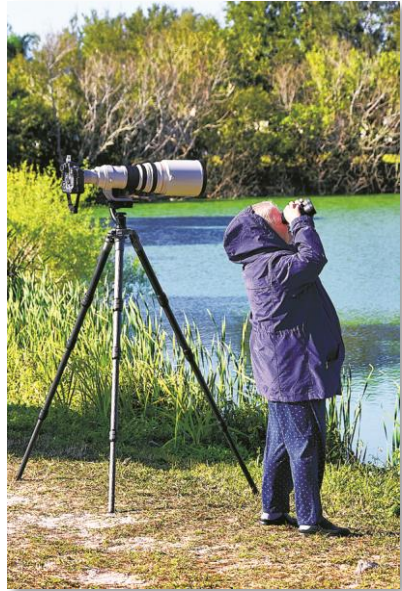
The bird photography sessions at Chincoteague kindled an interest in finding other venues to engage in the hobby. In 1999 I discovered the world of professional photography teaching workshops. For these outings, a working pro arranges for small groups to tour well-known birding spots while providing instruction on artistic and technical aspects of the craft.

## Susie's Garden

Florida is a popular destination for such tours; the climate and environment combine to make the entire state something of a paradise for bird photographers from all over the world, especially during the usually mild winters. I signed up for a Florida west coast tour, with stops at Ding Darling NWR on Sanibel Island, Captiva Island beach, Cape Coral and its burrowing owls and a final day at the Venice Rookery, a bird sanctuary maintained by the local Audubon Society on an artificial island in the middle of a man-made pond.

The trip went well and I wanted to return in the future. I asked Susan to accompany me on the next trip and she agreed, excited by the opportunity to see new species that rarely or never appeared at Chincoteague, among them roseate spoonbills, wood storks, reddish egrets, burrowing owls—and, in numbers and proximity never possible at Chincoteague, brown pelicans.

Our next trip was in 2006. After that, we returned in 2008 and finally in 2011 for a longer stay, during which we visited birding hot spots such as St. Augustine Alligator Farm, Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge and the Viera Wetlands on Florida's east coast; and finally, the everglades, including Shark Valley and Anhinga Trail.



*Birdwatching at Audubon Society Venice Rookery*

On one trip we were accompanied by my brother, Ron and his wife Sylvia. It was a rare opportunity to spend extended time together. It was a great experience for all of us. Naturally Ron and I debated the merits of different camera brands, but the real fun for me was photographing my favorite subject side by side with a brother. During one of our visits, Ron also gave us a tour of his forestry workplace.

For Susan's benefit, we visited Sarasota's world-renowned Selby

Gardens.

Susan enjoyed all of these trips, but her favorite parts were the opportunities to be close to brown pelicans at wharfs frequented by fishermen. The pelicans, in the hopes of handouts, would congregate whenever there was activity at dockside, and Susan wanted to be there to observe. Susan was ecstatic. I don't think I've ever seen her so happy and enjoying herself so much in all the years of our marriage.

At one location I laid down on the dock to get closer to eye level with the birds in the water waiting expectantly thinking that Susan might be a source of goodies. Suddenly I felt something on my back—a pelican. It had hopped onto the dock and was walking over me to get to the hoped-for provider.

## *Of Peeps<sup>3</sup> and Chicks*

Naturally, the summer visits to Chincoteague continued every summer, Florida notwithstanding. Sadly, over the years the summer bird population declined, to the point where it became more and more difficult to find anything worthwhile. One location that had never yielded anything useful was the south end of the Assateague



*Gregarious brown pelicans gather*

beach parking lot where there is a turn-around circle. Further south is Tom's Hook and an old abandoned Coast Guard station. Going beyond the circle requires an over-sand vehicle pass, an excursion we only made once. I

had never seen anything at the circle, and in fact the area from

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<sup>3</sup> The term "peeps" is birder shorthand for small shorebirds.

parking lot to cove side is roped off and closed to human foot traffic during the spring and early summer breeding season. This area of the island is a breeding location for fragile piping plover, least tern and black skimmer populations.



**Peep-lo Peeps.** On one particular day at the turnaround circle a quick flash of white caught my eye. I looked closer and realized there were two little piping plover chicks darting about on the edge of the road. The parking lot is paved with crushed sea shells and the surrounding land is covered with low, scrubby vegetation and sea shell over wash. The shells served as perfect camouflage habitat for the mostly white piping plovers. I was thrilled, and I managed to set up my big lens and capture a few images before they disappeared. A survey of the area revealed a protective cage occupied by a nesting female, the cage there to keep ravenous gulls from taking eggs or chicks.

That experience stayed with me, and in succeeding trips I checked the spot regularly. The next year, I hit the jackpot. I discovered an apparently mated pair who played alongside the parking lot frequently. I spent the week chasing these little peeps, and it was one of the most fun and rewarding experiences of my 35 years visiting the refuge. Piping plovers had the most haunting bird call I have ever heard. David Allen

Sibley, renowned bird expert, calls it the peep-lo song. It is a rising mid-tone opening followed immediately by a descending note. The voice varies by individual, but for that day and those birds, it was a soft, sibilant sound resembling a woodwind instrument rather than a



*Piping plover eyes photographer while mate watches*

sharp whistle. In the isolation of the sun and the beach and the surf, the sound was a bit of avian magic blocking out everything else.

According to refuge staff, there was a mama, a papa and one chick. I only ever saw them together once, and that for just a few seconds. But, they're clever little mischief makers; according to staff, one of them ditched its radio transmitter, leaving staff wandering the dunes with an antenna and receiver in an attempt to find the high-tech discard.



*Shelling on Assateague Beach*

Endangered and protected, piping plovers nest on the south end of Assateague Island, and during mating season the whole area is posted and roped off to keep people out. But sometimes their nest site is near the beach parking lot,

and the families may spend time nearby before dispersing. This presents opportunities not always available. Thankfully that year they stayed close.

These petite peeps— so small it seems improbable that they can actually fly— are endlessly entertaining, scurrying about with hardly a pause. This, combined with infrequent excursions outside their posted nesting area make them difficult subjects to photograph. One is forced to follow along outside the ropes as best one can, hoping they will stay close enough to the parking lot for photography. As quick as they are, only a handheld setup works, eliminating tripod mounted long lenses.

As a consequence of the posted restrictions as well as the perpetual motion of the plovers themselves I could never get close enough to get the kind of frame-filling images I would have preferred. Until the last day.

## Susie's Garden

That last morning, I happened on a single plover. With lens in hand, I tried to get close. It scurrying about, apparently intent on staying just ahead of a very frustrated photographer—one rarely glimpsed more than tailfeathers. It would run or fly a dozen feet, then pause, or sometimes hop into a divot in the sand and roost for a few seconds, always with its back to me. Then, with a look over its shoulder it would flutter off again. Frankly, I couldn't keep up.

Finally in exasperation, I abandoned the chase and turned back toward my car. Just as I was about to open the door and stow the lens and camera, the little creature winged its way back to me and plopped down inside the posted area nearby. The chase was on a second time—with the same result. Once again, I gave up and returned to the car. Amazingly, the plover winged back and settled, watching me almost as if it was playing a game. A third chase ensued. Since the plover could fly, the result didn't change.



*Piping plover plays keep-away, then poses for photographer*

This time, I decided enough was enough and I returned to my car. Incredibly, the little plover seemed to sense that this was it. It fluttered in and landed on a small hillock of sand and seashells at the

edge of the parking lot, there to pose while I blew through a few dozen exposures. Not having to give chase, I had time to crouch down as near to eye level as possible. (BTW, a telephoto lens makes a great crutch if you are old enough to have trouble getting up! But, be sure to brush the sand off the lens hood.) It was still some distance inside the rope, but this was the first and only opportunity of the week to shoot a meaningful sequence without having to pursue a target perpetually in motion. The results were well worth the wait.

With this experience in hand, I checked every year. Only once more did a sighting occur and it was much more mundane—no game playing this time.



**Chick Time.** But time and patience soon brought a new golden opportunity on another trip. One day early in the week, while regretting that there was nothing at Tiny Tom's Cove except the ubiquitous gulls, a movement caught my eye. Closer examination revealed a tiny chick scurrying across the sand toward the beach parking lot. I was able to get a few images before it outran me. Following it, I realized that it was joining its mother, an oystercatcher. Together they climbed the beach dunes and made sure



*Oystercatcher chicks flee frightening one-eyed ogre*

to keep a safe distance from their pursuer.

There was little success this session but the week had only just begun, and those little chicks—there were three in all—became my photographic obsession. By and

by, I learned how to get close without alarming them. My first try ended when mama escorted her brood around the shore line to the

far side of Tiny Tom's Cove. I realized that I had approached too quickly too soon. The next day I waited patiently at a distance while they engaged in their morning meal and ablutions. By and by, the mother became drowsy, not an infrequent happening once birds have had their morning chow. She settled down and watched her brood cavort nearby, rousing only long enough to chase away a laughing gull intruding on her strip of beach. By now, she seemed quite unconcerned by my presence. There followed a couple of highly productive days photographing the chicks' antics.

I had been giving Susan progress reports every day upon return from the refuge. She hadn't visited Assateague for years, content to remain at our rental house and read, drink tea, commune with our daughter and keep watch for goose families. But I finally convinced her that the chicks were worth seeing.



*Mated oystercatcher pair perversely nests on beach each year*

So, the last morning of our visit she came along, binoculars in hand. The oystercatcher chicks performed on cue, and to say that she was delighted with the outing would be a drastic understatement. We spend hours on the edge of Tiny Tom's Cove, watching the chicks dart about, pecking at every scrap of detritus, only to discover that it was not food after all. Some settled down near mama for their own naps.

It was an experience I treasure as much as anything that had gone before—in no small measure because it was Susan's last trip ever to the refuge. For it to have been such a good one provides a measure of bittersweet comfort now that she is gone.

## The Last Encounter

I went without her at her insistence in June of the year she became ill, to spend time with the rest of our family and to keep the tradition alive. During this visit, I had two more rather singular close encounters.

Although there wasn't much going on at the refuge this particular June, even less than the previous year, nevertheless two incidents added to the success of the visit. The first involved a pair of nesting oystercatchers, probably the same pair that, according to refuge staff, builds their nest near the beach every year. On the last day, there was a roped off area where the female was sitting on eggs. But the unusual close encounter had taken place a day before mama settled in to incubate her clutch.

I was trying to photograph the pair on the beach— and got more than I bargained for. After pursuing these two for quite a while, suddenly



*Curious mama oystercatcher investigates photographer*

the smaller of the two, undoubtedly the female, turned and walked toward me, getting so close that her head and bill filled the entire frame. Thankfully, she stayed just outside the minimum focus distance of my lens. The result was a

succession of remarkably intimate images, of the lady looking me over.

The second incident involved a pair of mated killdeers. There's an over wash area between the north beach parking lot and Swan Cove. Filled with broken shells and low scrubby vegetation, it is a barren flat in which the killdeer pair forages for insects and seeds. Beyond

## Susie's Garden

is a dense thicket of vegetation bordering the backside approach to Swan Cove. On the morning in question, I parked and scanned the area with binoculars, to no avail initially. The area is roped off as a breeding section so one can only approach to the barrier.

In the distance, up against that wall of vegetation and far outside the range of even my biggest lens, I caught sight of a killdeer searching for food. Nevertheless, ever hopeful I set up the big lens on tripod and waited, the bird still a tiny spec in the viewfinder. I stood watching and lamenting my bad luck when suddenly the killdeer looked my way and

took to wing, flying directly toward me. It landed perhaps twenty or thirty feet away and stood watching. My luck soon got ever better. The female joined the male, and right there in front of me they—well, they did what



*Curious killdeer gives photographer the eye*

birds do in the story of the birds and the bees. Afterwards the male stood watching me as if to say, did you enjoy the show!

These new encounters with curious birds made the trip a most memorable one -- proving once again the wildlife photography adage that when all else fails give patience a try.

I called Susan to tell her about these experiences, as I did with even the most trivial events when I wasn't with her. She had stopped coming to Chincoteague after a bad experience at the only dialysis center on Eastern Shore. Although our daughter and I begged her repeatedly, and her husband volunteered to make the hour-long drive from Chincoteague to the Eastern Shore clinic, she was adamant in her refusal.

Another reason in addition to her bad dialysis experience was the sheer length of the drive, five hours plus a lunch stop on the way.

## Susie's Garden

Sitting there in our rental house beside Oyster Bay I reflected on what might remove her driving time objection. Then, it hit me.

I would fly her to the island by charter airplane.

I started researching the idea and discovered that there is an airport at Accomack, forty minutes south of Chincoteague. Their web site advertises charter services and I already knew that there were two airports near our home, both of which originated charter flights. It would be expensive to be sure, but I didn't care—it cut travel time from five hours or more to one hour. We could pick her up on arrival and drop her off at the end of the week to catch a return charter.

There is risk involved with small airplanes, risk that only she could evaluate. I broached the subject when I got home, and for once she seemed buoyed by the prospect. She wouldn't firmly commit but she said she would consider it.

Two weeks after I returned, she came home from dialysis and, sitting down on our sofa, she began rocking back and forth and moaning in agony. She never recovered, and after two extended hospital stays she came home to see her garden one last time.

## *The Restless Ocean*

Sadly, the days of summer trips are numbered and from now on my visits are likely only to be during Thanksgiving week. The



present beach has been under severe stress throughout the 35 years we have been visiting, pounded by hurricanes, nor'easters and natural wind and wave action. When we first visited in 1990 there was a

*Storm clouds gather over doomed beach*

## Susie's Garden

permanent beach bathhouse. That structure is long gone, a casualty of repeated storm surges and beach migration westward. The current beach occupies a narrow strip of land between the Atlantic Ocean and Little Toms Cove, probably little more than a few hundred yards wide at its narrowest. Hurricanes occasionally breach the strip, creating a channel between the ocean and the cove.

Because the beach is an indispensable economic asset to the town and to Eastern Shore, the park service always restores the beach, the backing dunes and the parking lot—often at a cost of many hundred thousand dollars or more. This has become an untenable budgetary



*Blas-off! Susan and daughter watch snow geese take to the sky at the Wildlife Loop*

drain, and funding has been approved to move the beach north a mile or two where the island is wider and less subject to erosion. Work is well underway and the new beach is scheduled for opening in the summer of 2027.

This situation may well portend an end to my summer visits. The refuge has long since deteriorated as a summer photography destination due to weather related impacts. There may have been a shift in refuge management philosophy. In the early days, the

impoundments were full of water year-round which created habitat for teeming summer populations of feeding waders, waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls and terns.

Then, whether due to a different management philosophy or to shifting patterns of weather and rainfall, things changed. Pools that once were full of water year-round became dry in the summer, reducing or eliminating them as habitat for summer birds. In a casual conversation with refuge staff, I was told that this situation had the benefit of fostering summer plant growth as food for autumn waterfowl migration. While dry summer pools may be ecologically sound, from my limited vantage point it has had the effect of reducing bird photography opportunities in the usual pools compared to the 1990s and into the 2000s.



*Storms, wind, waves have long since obliterated Assateague Beach bath house*

In the early days one could drop a tripod mounted big lens almost anywhere and find good subjects, whether during summer or fall migration. Now, the only productive summer spots are sheltered cove-side inlets behind

the beach parking lot—and those only in the morning when the sun, rising over the Atlantic, provides full frontal light on the inlets. There, gulls, willets and oystercatchers still hang out and preen their feathers and nap after a morning meal.

Moreover, and once again based on my limited observation, migration census levels appear to be reduced as well. Perhaps peak migration has shifted to a time different than Thanksgiving week, but now that week brings only a trickle of waterfowl compared to the flood decades ago. With only the sample of a one week stay, it is

difficult to draw firm conclusions.

Changing management philosophy? Changing climate conditions? Birds migrating at a different time of year? I honestly don't know. I just know that, from my admittedly limited view of the refuge, opportunities have declined in recent years.



The beach relocation plan calls for not only abandoning the current beach but also closing access to all except foot traffic at the start of the Swan Cove causeway, the same place where I made my first bird photograph 35 years ago. Unfortunately, there is little of photographic value to the north, toward the site of the new beach. Worse, it is a long drive through wooded areas, habitat unlikely to provide the kind of opportunities that the impoundments and pools



*Sunrise over the Atlantic, Assateague Beach*  
provide. Time will tell, but it won't be me doing the telling. With Susan no longer with me the enjoyment is gone anyway.

The beach move will change everything. Once the new beach opens in 2027 the best morning spots on the island in summer will be cut off. Already the afternoons were washouts. Thus, summers will

## Susie's Garden

become doubtful at best—although our daughter and her family will continue to take advantage of the kayaking opportunities. For me, this may be the end of the line after over 35 years of summer visits. Thanksgiving week will become my primary visit time because it coincides with waterfowl migration and all-day Wildlife Loop opportunities.

## *Grandma and Grandpa!*



*No spring nor summer  
hath such grace  
As I have seen  
In one autumnal face  
— John Donne*

*Every child should have  
Someone who spoils them—  
For me, it was my grandmother  
— Author*



ur daughter married in 2010. We gave the new couple a decent interval of time before we, like many parents of daughters before us, began making discrete inquiries as to whether there might be any new arrivals in the offing. By and by our daughter announced that a blessed event was anticipated. We were overjoyed. One has to reach a certain age to realize the importance of a new generation, and we had hit that age. The continuity of life may seem an abstract term to some, but for us, as for many others, it was a real yearning.

We received the long hoped for call mid-morning one fine day in October and made the one-hour drive to her hospital. She was in good spirits, and Susan immediately began comforting and caring for

her as only a mother can. Like her mother, she is a small woman, and her labor became extended. The delivery doctor made the decision that a Caesarian delivery was indicated and she was taken to the delivery theater for the procedure.

By now it was well past nightfall, and we went to a waiting area next to the neo-natal care unit where an interior window gave friends and relatives a portal through which to watch as newborns were brought in, cleaned up and made ready for their new life.



*Grandpa holds little bundle of joy*

Our new grandson was placed on a table right next to the window and we watched as the nurse took care of him. Soon I noticed something unexpected. The newborn began to look around, to take in his surroundings, exploring visually. Perhaps this is a common and expected thing, just as our own newborn daughter's grasp of my pinky finger was supposedly typical. But to me those eyes bespoke an intelligent mind awakening to a new situation.

At that point I guessed that this new hour-old infant was going to be special.

As it turned out, my guess proved to be accurate.



Susan spent several days with the new parents and their new arrival, helping with care of mother and her new son—our grandson! There has rarely been a new grandpa as proud of the new arrival as I was. Thereafter we visited frequently, to provide extra hands for care and also to give the new parents an occasional break for a for few hours' get away.

At about six months, just as spring began to mitigate winter's cold, I began doing something almost by instinct that proved the wisdom of my initial guess about the potential of this little waif. I began taking him on walks around his yard and his neighborhood, first carrying

him and then holding his hand as he began to walk. What I did was to stop at each new object, call his attention to it and say its name. "Flower." "Tree." "Chair." And so on. I noticed that he paid rapt attention to each new discovery, as if he was absorbing and assimilating the new information.

This, I believed, confirmed to me that, like his mother and his grandmother before him, he had an intelligent mind. It was six years before he entered school, where our guess was confirmed by teachers—but we already knew. As he advanced in school, he quickly became bored with the beginner math fare that most kids were



*Grandma and Big Trouble, eyeball to eyeball*

taught. At some point he was advanced a grade in math, and a year or two later he was advanced another grade, putting him in with kids two years older. Not only did he keep up, he thrived.

During his preschool years he visited Grandma and Grandpa often, sometimes staying for several days. We played the same game in Susan's curio laden house—name the object. During these sessions he remained silent, concentrating intently on each new object as it was identified to him. More than that, we played together outside. He had a tendency to invent new games, whether it was using a stick as an imaginary sword in an adventure in a far-off land or changing

the rules when we attempted an established game.

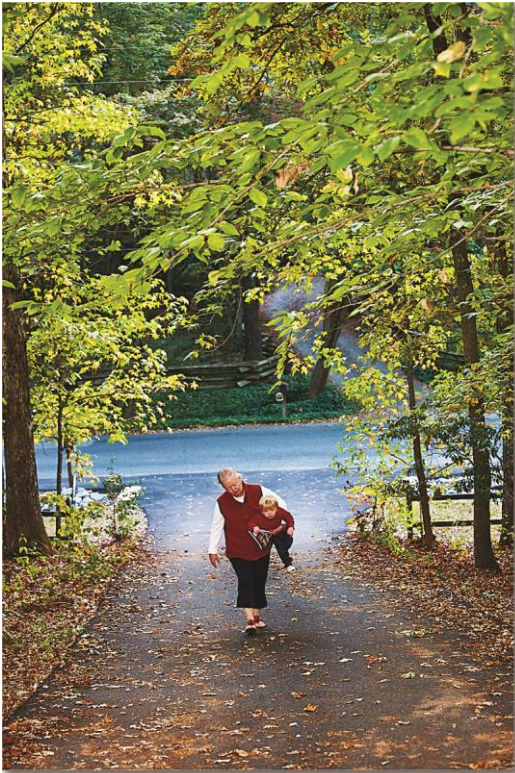
I was taken back in memory to my own childhood, where on one visit to my paternal grandparents' farm in the fall I grabbed a corn stalk and began whacking dry standing corn stalks as if fighting an imaginary army.



*Cat contemplates prize canary*

As a lifelong sports enthusiast, I introduced him to ball tossing and kicking, and we even played a bit of soccer together in the back yard. In the fall, he loved to take long runs and dive into piles of fallen leaves left there for just that purpose. Eventually, I bought a small portable tennis net, tiny racquet and nerf balls. Sadly, for Grandpa, outdoor sports didn't catch on, but as he grew older, he took up scouting with his dad, even learning to be the camp chef on outings. When his

parents bought kayaks for our wildlife refuge trips, he got his own kayak and went right along with them. While I would have been delighted if he had taken to sports, the scouting and kayaking were good activities that got him outdoors and that taught self-reliance.



*Grandma retrieves escaped explorer*

His preferred activity became online gaming, and he formed contacts with other gamers around the country as well as school friends in his home town. I'm not sure this is altogether a good thing. One certainly learns to cooperate with others, an important skill in today's world. But my observation is that not only does it keep kids indoors but it also can become addictive.

Once he got old enough, Grandma initiated him into her favorite activity, teasing. As he sat playing his online games, she would sit next to him and ask endless questions about the game. If he was communicating verbally with another gamer, she would ask who it was and then call out, "Hello! This is grandma." to the other party. She gently tried to insert herself into his span of attention as a distraction. It was her form way of teasing him as well as communing with him in the activity he enjoyed most. He bore it with patience, but occasionally an exasperated, "*Grandma!*" would issue forth.



She also began another custom that her own grandmother, Mema, had practiced with her from childhood. Each birthday and Christmas Susan gave our grandson cash folding money just as Mema had done for her. This was an important tradition; it had taught her the value of money and the importance of saving it for special purposes.



During my own growing up years, my friends and I left home after breakfast and didn't return until dark. We roamed the woods or plinked tin cans with our air rifles, played baseball in the summer and football in the

*Kayaking with Dad*

winter, bought fireworks for the Fourth of July and generally lived the traditional life of young boys growing up in the 1950s and '60s. Our growing up years weren't much different than that of boys a hundred years or more before.

It seems to me that with the increasing urbanization of society, that connection with nature is being eroded among our younger generations. On the positive side, developing an ability to cooperate with others toward a common goal is not an inconsequential skill in today's increasingly interconnected world.

## *Brothers and Sisters*



*If thy brother wrongs thee,  
Remember not so much his wrong-doing,  
But more than ever that he is thy brother.*

— Epictetus



Susan was an only child but I was the first of Ruth's three sons. As brothers, we were close growing up despite quite a difference in our ages—I was seven and eleven years older than Ron and Andy respectively. We often played rough house football in the yard with other neighborhood children their age. I enjoyed it immensely as these tiny Lilliputians swarmed over big brother. Once I left for college I was always mobbed by the other two when I came home on break. Over the years, we remained close, in spirit if not in distance—I ended up in Virginia, Andrew lived in New Mexico before moving to Tennessee and Ron became something of a nomad, living in Tennessee, Oklahoma, Florida and Wisconsin before settling in Texas in retirement.

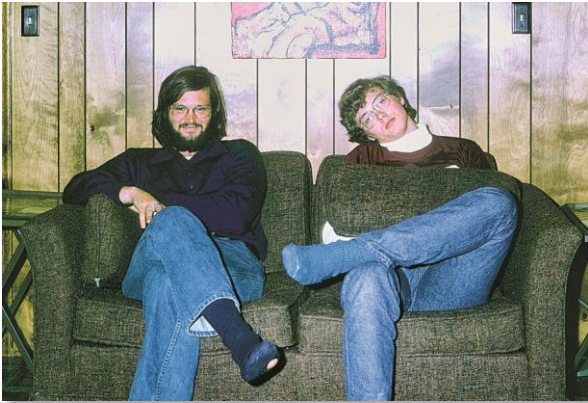
Whenever Ron and I happened to be visiting Ruth at the same time we made a practice of engaging in an Indian arm-wrestling contest. Once we were married, Susan tut-tutted over these bouts but accepted them as necessary male behavior. I was older but he was taller and heavier. For years, I was always won, mainly by taking

## Susie's Garden

advantage of the leverage from longer arms. But Ron never gave up. Eventually, there came a time when we fought to a draw. It took a terrible toll on my right arm and by the time Susan and I returned home I was feeling it. For days I could not lift even a salad bowl and all doors had to be opened left-handed.

Not being a glutton for punishment, I politely demurred at the suggestion of a repeat performance next time.

We each were blessed with the lifetime companionship and love of good women and stable marriages, something of an accomplishment



*Bachelor brothers—before the civilizing effect of wives took charge of them*

for three young men who came from a broken home, raised by a single mother with hardly a penny to her name. Ron dated several young ladies during the time after Susan and I were married. When he brought Sylvia

home to Ruth's house during one of our visits, I took Ron aside after meeting her to render my opinion. "Ron, this one's a keeper." And so she was. Somewhat like my experience on meeting Susan, Andrew relates that when he first saw Carolyn in church one day, he leaned over to a friend and said, "Someday I'm going to marry that young lady." And he did.

The sons of a nurse and a ne'er-do-well Air Force sergeant whose marriage ended in acrimony and divorce, we each graduated from college into successful professional careers, Ron in the natural sciences and Andrew in the aviation industry.

Both my brothers and I served as groomsmen at each other's weddings. At Ron and Sylvia's wedding our daughter served as their flower girl, a role for which she was dressed in a beautiful yellow gown

hand made by Susan. She treasured that dress afterward and delighted in dressing up in it until she outgrew it. After she came down the aisle with her flowers, she stood close to me on stage. She was a perfect angel during the ceremony. When the "I do's" were said, she looked up at me and stage-whispered, "She's Aunt Sylvia now!" We had explained on the way to the wedding why we were going and what it meant for Sylvia. She remembered.

As soon as the ceremony was over, she sat down on the edge of the stage and bawled inconsolably. We suspect it was release from the tension of being an on-stage member of the wedding party.



Over the years, our three families exchanged many visits with each other. Susan enjoyed these visits much as I did and she quickly fit it. Both Ron and Sylvia and Andrew and Carolyn came to visit us many times, each with two children in tow. We visited Andrew on many occasions, often in conjunction with visits to Ruth. We also rendezvoused with Ron and Sylvia at Andrew and Carolyn's home after they retired. Because Ron lived in so many places over the years, and because travel for us was greatly complicated



*The family musician*

by the difficulty of obtaining care for David, we only visited Ron and Sylvia once, while they lived in Florida. This was a delightful visit as we toured not only Ron's work-place but also many natural landmarks in the area. We also spent time with them in Florida during the aforementioned bird photography expedition, a rare opportunity for Ron and I to engage jointly in our shared interest in photography.

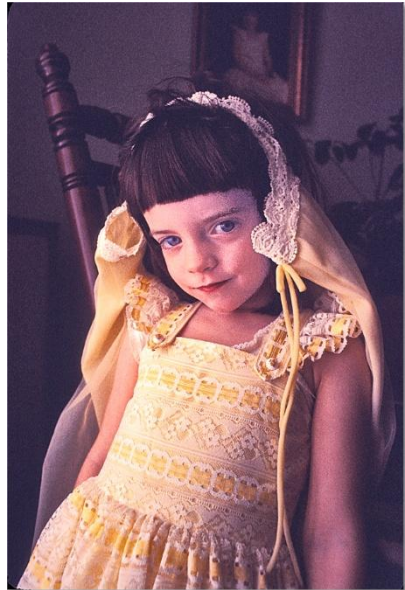
## Susie's Garden

On one visit to Andrew and Carolyn's home, we were all playing cards, a group that included their young daughter, Michelle. As the youngest, Michelle naturally struggled a bit initially, although we could all see that she had potential. At one point, Michelle got up from the table to visit the kitchen. Susan followed her. As Carolyn related the incident, Susan spoke to Michelle about how to succeed at cards.

"Always keep track of every card that has been played. That way you will know what is still out and you can best decide what to do next."

It was good advice from a woman who counted and could remember every card played and who could project with unerring accuracy what should happen next. It fell on fertile ground and in later years adult Michelle became a highly competent and sought after professional—and a highly skilled card player and game player in general.

There were also family expeditions to various vacation locations, accompanied by our grown children. The first took place after a long period with minimum contact. Instigated by Andy, we all gathered at a rustic resort in north Georgia called Dillard's. From there we sallied forth to Tallulah Gorge and to North Georgia's Angel Falls area. It was a grand reunion, enjoyed by all. When our children began marrying, we each attended their weddings.



*Flower Girl at Uncle Ron & Sylvia's wedding: "She's Aunt Sylvia now!"*

The next event saw us gathering at an enormous mountain rental chalet in the Gatlinburg area. Mostly we just stayed at the chalet and enjoyed each other's company. But one afternoon we did venture into Gatlinburg for amusement. We discovered a rather elaborate go cart race track, and it was "Game on!" We all thrilled to pilot the speedy

little cars around a rollercoaster-like track. The racers were released at intervals rather than all at once so it was impossible for anyone to legitimately claim victory, but it was certainly fun.

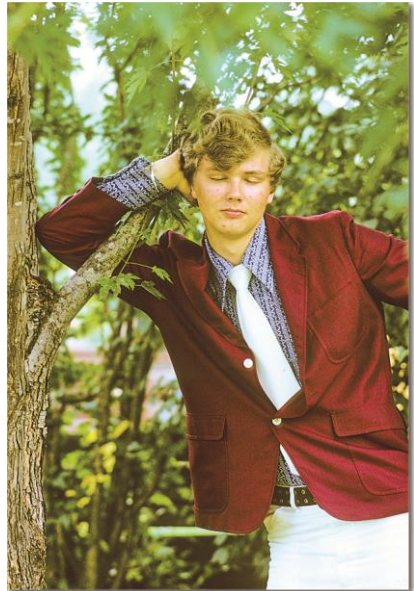


A few years ago, Sylvia was the innocent victim of a terrible auto accident. A reckless young man driving a pickup truck far in excess of the speed limit on city streets lost control of his vehicle and crashed head-on into Sylvia's car. She was trapped in the car in agony as fire and rescue responders debated how to extricate her. Ron was called to the scene, and after watching the debate drag on with rising concern he intervened.

“Get on with it. Get her out *now*.”

Sylvia was finally rescued from the mangled wreck and transported to a hospital for emergency surgery and treatment for many broken bones and injuries. There followed a long stay in the hospital and an extended period of rehabilitation before Sylvia's health returned to normal.

Susan was very moved by the tragedy. Showing her true merit as a woman and a sister, Susan sent Sylvia a sympathy card and a chatty letter every day throughout her ordeal. As Sylvia emerged from the darkest part of the ordeal, Susan's cards became more light hearted and less serious—fitting her own cheerful nature to Sylvia's returning strength.



I have no doubt that this sealed a bond between these two women. *Casual insouciance personified* Susan and Sylvia shared another bond—both were flower gardeners—and whenever they got together, they would talk shop and compare notes. Their skills were quite different, however, as Sylvia's home

## Susie's Garden

benefited from full sun all day whereas Susan's own in-the-woods garden was full of hostas, ferns, ligularia, linden rose and other shade-loving plants.



After Susan had to go on dialysis, the brothers and wives came to visit, initially soon thereafter and again a couple of years later, just months before Susan left us. These visits were particularly difficult for Andrew, who had been suffering with Parkinson's for quite some time—but he and Carolyn nevertheless made the trip, both trips, and it was impossible for us to show them how much we appreciated their concern and their willingness to travel. I told Susan afterward that they didn't come on account of me—they came in honor of and sympathy for her.



*Brothers and wives pose for family rogue's gallery portrait*

These visits were delightful. Most of the time we just sat in our living room and reminisced, we brothers swapping tall tales and lies about the extravagant things we did as youths. The ladies enjoyed the show, occasionally elaborating from their viewpoint or throwing sand in the works if the stories became too outrageous. One example where



*Susan and Michael with brothers and wives*

Susan contributed her perspective was the incident of the Firebird in the back yard.

We went out for dinner in the evenings, but we often dined on snacks during the day. During the

## Susie's Garden

second visit, Sylvia rolled out a totally incomprehensible card game involving matching certain combinations for scores. I hated it—I suppose because I didn't do as well as I would have at a more conventional game such as Hearts or, perish the thought, Bridge, which only Susan and I played.

One rather perspective altering incident took place during the second visit. Any time the six of us got together the subject eventually worked its way around to our mother, Ruth. Everyone had their favorite Ruth story, and we rolled them all out again. For Susan's part, she revisited our first trip after our marriage—the one where she had laid down the law to Ruth regarding treatment of her new



*Last photograph ever of brothers and wives together, May 2025*  
husband-to-be.

The topic soon turned to Ruth's failed marriage and subsequent divorce, with all agreeing that our father had been something of a louse. The consensus was that surely Ruth must have come to detest him. Susan spoke up and interjected a viewpoint that startled us all.

We were all ignoring the obvious, she pointed out. "Look at the disparity between your ages. Surely you can see that if she kept

## Susie's Garden

letting him come back, she must have had some regard for him else you wouldn't be here." We all sat in stunned silence for a few moments. Eventually, someone ventured, "Well, when you put it like that. . ." As usual, she saw what no one else did, not even her sons.

The most humorous incident of the visit occurred when I pointed out that Susan could not enunciate the southern pronunciation of the word, *ruined*. Having grown up in the rural South, such words were a natural part of my native dialect. She blushed and asked brothers and wives, "How do each of you pronounce it?" She volunteered her own version, trying hard to mimic the way I say it but failing miserably: "I say *runt*." Try as she might, she just couldn't do it.

We dutifully went around the room, each husband and each wife, and myself, intoning effortlessly in turn, *runnt*. She was amazed, but despite trying again and again she just couldn't do it. We concluded that everyone has their Achilles heel after all, and that was hers. Pretty small potatoes as far as shortcomings are concerned.



*Last photograph of Susan and I together, May 2025*

Perhaps I shouldn't relate how she did with "tired" rendered in Southern-speak. The rest of us immediately pronounced, "*tarred*." I'll just say that Susan missed the mark with notable effect. Her

## Susie's Garden

speech peculiarities were about of the few things I could tease her about.

I believe that these visits showed Susan just how much the others cared for her. As a result, I believe she adopted my brothers and their wives as her own brothers and sisters.

## Susie's Garden

*Part III Coda:*  
*Requiescat In Pace*



## Susie's Garden

## The Gathering Storm



*In life's fleeting whispers  
Hear the echoes of eternity*  
— Emily Dickinson

*Such a one do I remember, whom to look at was love*  
“Locksley Hall”  
—Alfred Lord Tennyson

*I myself must mix with action, lest I wither by despair.*  
“Locksley Hall”  
—Alfred Lord Tennyson



Every avalanche begins with a single snowflake; every flood with a single drop of rain. Thus, it was with Susan. In her youth, health was a constant. She was rarely sick and she cared for me when I was. But time betrays us all, and little by little exceptions began to appear. Each one was attended to in turn but taken together they traced an arc into the future, its downward trajectory unseen at the time.

## Two Cancers

Susan had always had skin problems so she routinely saw a dermatologist for treatment. A few times small precancerous growths were removed by cryotherapy. A more serious condition, a pair of skin cancers, emerged in the middle years—a scalp lesion and a more aggressive cancerous growth on her ankle. The scalp cancer was removed by a specialist. On the drive to the clinic, she said little. I remember her laying on the gurney, sedated and awaiting transport to the operating theater.



*Susan awaiting grandson's birth*

I could always tell when she was scared, not just worried, because she would look up to me with the same wide, luminous little girl eyes that she had bequeathed to our daughter, trying to pretend cheerfulness that she did not feel and looking to me for reassurance that it would all come out well. The nurses prepared her for surgery with IV and sedation. Just before they wheeled her away on her gurney, she spoke to me as I held her hand. Her words to me were remarkable, a measure of how much the ordeal had shaken her.

“You intimidate me.”

Her eyes were shining with that same little girl trust that I would not let anything bad happen to her. It was an expression of deep and abiding love—and of need, for reassurance. I smiled and squeezed her hand, trying to hide my surprise, and I assured her that she would be fine. With that she was wheeled away. It did turn out well; the lesion was cancerous but the surgeon got it all in time and she

recovered fully. For the rest of her life her scalp bore a small scare reminding us of the surgery, but in time it became invisible to both of us—it was simply a part of her, to be loved along with the rest of her.

Oddly, a co-worker once told me something similar to Susan's plea, that I intimidated the younger employees in our group. Even her mother had said the same thing the first time we met. I've never thought of myself that way—although I can understand junior employees being overly impressed by a senior engineer. However, for the highly independent and self-reliant Susan to say that tells me that she was terribly worried that day and, reserve in tatters, wanted to be told it would end well.



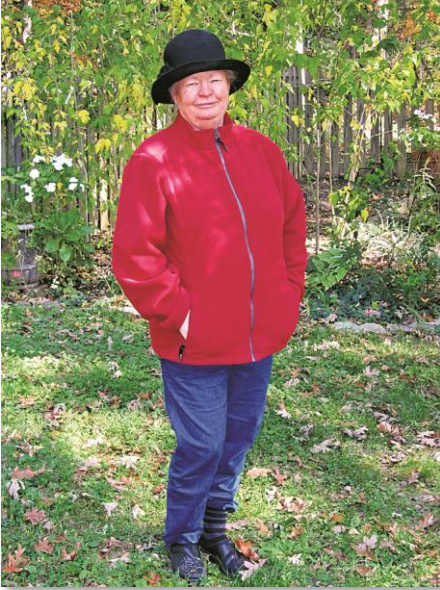
The second cancer, an ugly lesion on her ankle, was far more serious. Its intrusion was much deeper and more invasive, and the removal could not heal by itself—a skin graft, taken from her thigh, was needed. This required a hospital stay of several days while the graft established itself. Although the hospital stay was unpleasant, she did comment favorably on the surgeon. An impressive doctor from Texas, he wore cowboy boots to the office. With one of those mischievous sideways glances at me she commented on how regrettable it was that he was married and had a house full of children—after all, he was quite good looking. And, he made doctor's money!

I took her comment in stride. If she could tease again, she must be feeling better.

Once she came home, she was restricted to near immobility as the healing process progressed. I did the cooking during this interregnum, mostly spaghetti since that was about all my skill level could manage. She watched a lot of TV in the meantime, discovering CSI in the process.

This set off a lifetime pursuit of crime-solving shows and movies. We accumulated an extensive library of mystery movies and watching them became her first choice of entertainment. For her, the mystery genre was a chance to exercise her agile mind in pursuit of the who-

done-it before the author or script writer revealed the answer. She had a knack for picking up on tiny but significant clues and correlations that I missed.



*Susan on a chilly fall day*

One of our favorites was the 1960s Perry Mason series. We speculated endlessly on who the guilty party might be throughout each episode, sometimes thwarted by the script writer's tendency to pull impossible-to-anticipate twists out at the end. While I enjoyed the mysteries and the entertainment, I also loved to see the old cars of the era retrieved from the time vault. It was a trip into nostalgia to see these vast chrome-laden, gas-guzzling land barges in action again, wallowing along on shamelessly soft

suspensions at every turn or curve.

Despite Susan's justifiable anxiety over these two interruptions both wounds healed without long term impact. The next one, however, in retrospect, portended trouble ahead although we didn't recognize it at the time.

## *The Best of Times*

Once retired, she had attacked the matter of creating the garden of her imagination with a vengeance. Every fair day, spring, summer or fall, found her outdoors, digging in the dirt, planting new acquisitions and watering and fertilizing them. She would take breaks, sitting on a garden glider set on a stone plaza that we had created for just that purpose. She would read or study garden books or browse on her tablet, drink iced tea and commune with her cat, a

constant presence whenever she was outdoors. A neighbor commented that the cat followed her around just like a dog.

is went on for years, and my guess is that this was the happiest time of her life. Although she enjoyed the challenge to her intellect of her professional career—and we both enjoyed the economic advantage that two incomes provided—she would have gladly given up work had she married a rich man. The fact that she chose me told me that she loved me more than she valued wealth or status.

Having finally retired, she could now spend her days doing exactly what she wanted, her only occupation, caring for an affectionate and attentive but admittedly high maintenance husband. However, she made sure when I retired that I understood that she was not my employee.



*Christmas in the garden*

“I know you supervised a lot of people at work, and now you think you can carry on by supervising me. Well, it’s not going to happen so find another way to scratch that itch!” This became one of her running jokes, to be trotted out whenever we were with married couples, swapping stories.

## *Happy Juice*

Having achieved a degree of the happiness Susan had sought for a lifetime, the first wispy clouds of real trouble appeared over the horizon, almost unnoticed at the time. She began to have trouble with strength and endurance in the garden. Her legs felt weak and she was unable to sustain a full day’s work without frequent rest stops. It slowly progressed until she couldn’t work at all and she knew

she had to get medical help. What we both thought was minor, perhaps a vitamin deficiency or a low-grade infection, turned out to be serious.

In short, the veins in her legs were becoming clogged with plaque, reducing blood flow and thus strength and endurance. This required the skills of yet another medical specialist. She described the process as having her veins “roto-rootered.” Proving that she was still all



*Susan as a stand-in model*

woman, she allowed that the surgeon was a scrumptious specimen of manhood, a teasing jibe that I took in stride. I knew she was just having her usual impish fun at my expense.

Once again, I supported her throughout the process. For each surgery we showed up at the doctor's outpatient clinic early so nurses could begin preparations. Afterward, after a recovery period I took her home, where she took it easy for a few days while her body finished healing.

A day or two before the second leg procedure she walked into a door by accident. I know, I know, this is the most common cliché in all of moviedom, but it was true in her case. A classic black eye developed quickly. When we went for her second surgery, the eye had reached an impressively ugly level of bruising, a dramatic condition that could not be ignored. When a nurse came in to prepare her, she could not help asking,

“What happened to you!?”

By now sedation had completely released Susan's residual

inhibitions, freeing her mischievous nature to roam where it would. Loaded to the gills with what she described as “happy juice”—and with eyes twinkling with that devilish sparkle that I knew so well—she assumed a soft, pitiful little girl voice and replied reproachfully, “He hit me.”

She paused for effect, and the nurse stole a glance at me. I tried to suppress laughter because I knew exactly what she was doing—having fun at my expense, knowing that I was a good sport about her teasing ways and that I would tolerate it in view of her condition. However, given the circumstances, it seemed wise to respond. I scolded her for leaving a very misleading impression with the nice nurse and asked her to be serious before we both got in trouble.

Fortunately, the nurse had picked up on that mischievous glint in Susan's eyes and ignored her comment, chalking it up to the effects of the sedation. Thankfully, the procedures were successful and she soon resumed work in her garden. Relieved to have survived a potentially dangerous health crisis, neither of us thought at the time to ask the more significant question—if there was plaque in her veins where else might blockages be hiding?

Having returned to normal health, Susan picked up where she had left off. We thought no more about the implications as we returned to enjoying our lives together.

## *My Turn*

Two days before Christmas, 2019, I made my first visit to my GP doctor in a number of years. The Friday before I had been playing a very competitive doubles tennis match that featured four evenly matched players. On my serve I got into one of those long deuce-add situations where I couldn't string together two points to end the game. As the game progressed, I began to experience extreme fatigue and shortness of breath. My legs felt dead and I could no longer elevate into the serve. I had to apologize to the other three and walk off the court—I couldn't continue.

I was so concerned that on the way home I called our doctor's office and made an emergency appointment for Monday morning. After a restless weekend, I showed up for an examination. The doctor placed the pickup of his stethoscope on my chest, listened for a moment and then left the room. Puzzled, I waited. A few minutes later he returned.

"I've called the rescue squad. You are going directly to the hospital from here."

I listened stunned as he explained that I had a condition called atrial fibrillation, *afib* for short. I needed surgery right away. As the medics



*Susan's delicious BELT-O: BLT + fried egg and sliced onion*

bundled my stretcher into their truck I was on the phone trying to round up a tennis substitute (I was scheduled to play that afternoon), unsuccessfully as it turned out, since everyone was out Christmas shopping. I gave up and called Susan. She met me at the hospital.

After a quick evaluation the catheterization lab team performed a procedure that stopped and restarted the heart in rhythm. I was kept overnight for observation and discharged the next day, Christmas Eve. By then our

daughter and her family had arrived, and someone had called my brothers. I had to sadly report to the coordinator of our tennis group that it would be quite a while before I could rejoin the group.



There followed a month of monitoring and testing, the outcome of which was that the problem had returned. The next step was an ablation, another catheterization procedure where a probe goes into

the heart to detect the area where electrical discharges are misfiring, creating the a fib condition. Once found, the area is zapped to stop the misfires, at least in most cases; it isn't 100% foolproof.

In the hospital awaiting this new procedure, I was oddly optimistic—I trusted the medical technology and the surgical team. Either I would wake up afterward or I wouldn't, in which case I would never know about it. In any event, I couldn't do anything about it. Not so, Susan, who tried without success to hide her deep panic. The surgeon made his pre-op visit, explaining what was to be done. Susan, who hid her emotions better than any human I've ever known, spoke to the doctor as he turned to leave. Her voice husky as she fought back emotion, she whispered in a voice laden with anxiety,



*Susan with the Madisons at Montpelier*

“Take good care of him. He’s the only one I’ve got.”

I was stunned by this raw admission and I tried to reassure her—telling her that I wasn't worried because I was confident in the procedure—but without much success. The situation was too fraught for her to remain calm.

The hospital has a waiting room for friends and relatives, and there is a status board showing who is in various theaters and what stage procedures are at. Afterward she related that at some point my status stopped updating. She was overcome with panic, thinking that something terrible had happened. However, the stoppage was merely the result of a delay in posting updates. The operation concluded without incident.

## "I can't breathe. . ."

It went well in recovery and although I will have to undergo semi-annual testing and take medication indefinitely, I soon resumed normal duties as husband, egret chaser and tennis bum. I could but be thankful for the technology—my mother had died from complications arising from atrial fibrillation. But fate wasn't done with us—that foul demon had only just begun his evil work. In September of 2020 the first gale force winds of the storm to come hit us with sudden, appalling force.

Susan woke me up at about midnight, barely able to speak and not totally cognizant of her surroundings.

"I can't breathe. I can't breathe. Please help me."

In a blind panic I threw on clothes and shepherded her to the car. She had trouble getting in but made it with a push from me. I backed out and hit the road at speed. Thankfully I had had the presence of mind to bring my phone for I immediately dialed 911 and told the operator we were headed to the hospital with a medical emergency. I asked her to call the emergency room and alert them to our impending arrival. Then I told her that I would put my flashers on and if she could alert city police, I wouldn't mind an escort.

We did pass one police car on the way. I saw brake lights in my rear-view mirror, but he didn't turn around to follow. Pulling into the ER covered entrance, I was disappointed to find no one waiting. I jumped out of the car and ran in, shouting, "Medical emergency! My wife can't breathe. I need a wheel chair *now*."

That brought quick action and she was hustled into triage immediately. Shortly thereafter she was taken to a room and, thankfully, seen by a doctor right away. He told us that she needed to go into surgery as soon as a team could arrive. I was sent to a waiting room, there to finally have time to start worrying in earnest. Time passed interminably with each minute feeling like a dozen. I began to wonder if they had forgotten where they put me. After what seemed forever, a doctor came to get me.

“You must come and talk to your wife. She needs surgery right away but she won't sign the release permitting us to proceed.”

On the way, he explained that she was having a heart attack and time was vital. He had already ordered a CT scan to determine whether there was damage to her brain, but thankfully that had turned up negative. But I could tell he was concerned, not only for her heart but also for any collateral damage due to lose of blood flow to the brain.

I joined her in theater. The surgery team was standing by, waiting to proceed. I told Susan she had to give permission because her situation was life-threatening. Her refusal bordered on the incoherent and didn't make sense. But then, I'm not sure she was rational by that time.

I turned to the surgeon. “What happens if she doesn't have the operation.”

“She might make it to the morning or she might not.” I think his answer helped convinced her. I spoke to Susan again.

“Sweetheart, you've got to let them do this. It is the only way you can survive, and I can't bear to be without you.”



*A skeptical eye*

With this, she relented. “All right,” she mumbled resignedly. She scrawled something illegible on the form and the wheels were immediately in motion. The doctor ordered one last CT scan, to verify again that no brain damage had been done. I was ushered out, to wait again for news. When it came the answer was that she would recover, but the plaque buildup had been extensive. It took three stints to clear the blockage, including a 100% block of an artery that cardiologists call, “the widow maker.”

## Tip of the Iceberg

Her hospital travail was not over, unfortunately. While recovering from heart surgery, routine hospital examinations uncovered a host of additional problems. She had high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high blood sugar, pre-diabetes, loss of kidney function and breast cancer. We later discovered that the high blood pressure had also blown out tiny blood vessels in her retinas, compromising her vision. She left the hospital with a new medical team: cardiologist, nephrologist and hematologist, to be joined soon by a retina specialist.

Although she was not well, she was finally home. The hospital had made follow up appointments for us and there then began a long series of doctor visits and medications. The most worrisome was the decline in kidney function. The nephrologist advised her to begin dialysis as soon as possible. The sooner she started the greater the



*Susan accepts scooter; husband gets his to keep up*

odds of a longer life expectancy.

She confessed to me afterward that she would rather die first.

Perhaps I should have insisted, but I didn't, to my lingering regret. Unfortunately for both of us, I loved

her too much to insist on anything that she adamantly refused to consider. Would she have listened? Knowing her tendency to dig in her heels, I doubt it. But hindsight says I should have tried.

We tried to salvage what we could in the aftermath. Our annual Chincoteague family visits continued for another year or two and we continued our Colonial Williamsburg outings. There, the walking became too much for her, and I suggested a scooter. Stubborn

## Susie's Garden

woman that she was, she rejected the idea. However, one day while she was visiting gardens and I was photographing colonial architecture she had to call me and ask me to come get her. After that she was forced to relent on the scooter.

The first time she hopped aboard her gleaming red chariot and tweaked the throttle she was a new woman. Carrying my usual load of camera gear, I couldn't keep up, so I had to get my own.

With this, the mischievous Susie reemerged and visitors were treated to the bizarre sight of two septuagenarians racing along the length of Duke of Gloucester Street, dodging visitors and carriage horse leavings along the way. Pedestrians beware! Our visits were again relaxing and fun.



*Susan doing what she loves*

Knowing her love of flowers and gardening, I made a map for her showing the location of every garden in the restored area. Freed from the exertion of walking she could now visit her beloved gardens independently. She especially enjoyed interacting with interpreters and volunteers at the colonial garden, the colonial farm and the bigger show gardens. I was overjoyed to see the Susie I loved begin to enjoy life again.

*"I'm useless. . ."*

Unfortunately, the nephrologist had not been wrong. Susan's condition worsened progressively over time. At some point in late 2022 she came face to face with the inevitable consequences of total kidney failure.

## Susie's Garden

The realization marked the only time in our entire marriage that I ever saw her cry inconsolably from personal anguish. We were trying to move a Ficus tree inside for the winter. I had given her the tree when our son was born, and by now the tree had gotten quite large and the pot very heavy. The branches spread wide enough that the tree needed help fitting through our French double doors. In the past we had always wrestled the tree in and out together. This time, for the first time ever, she didn't offer to help. As I struggled with the tree I asked in exasperation, "Can you at least help by putting something under the pot?"

She didn't budge. Instead, she began sobbing uncontrollably, "*I'm useless, I'm useless.*" I was stunned. The explanation poured forth in racking sobs; it wasn't just crying; it was the hopeless grief of a lost soul. "I have to go on dialysis. My life is over. I'll never work in my garden again. I'll never see the ocean again. We'll never be able to take trips again. I'll never be able to do *anything.*" These words, she gasped out between sobs.

It was all too obvious to a woman of her intelligence what dialysis meant for her future—even her life expectancy. The blow was devastating and it almost took the heart out of her, leaving her with virtually no emotional reserves to deal with a dark and clouded future. In that moment did she see all the way to the end? I'll never know, but she was brilliant—she had made a lifetime practice of, when presented with a problem, skipping all the steps in between and leaping to the answer at once. I believe that this time the leap was into a dark abyss that was utterly terrifying to her.



*A "Little Old Lady" now but  
always lovely to me*

The impact on me was hardly less desolating. Shocked to the very bottom of my soul to see her so devastated, I tried as best I could to

comfort her, a forlorn and feeble effort compared to her suffering. I told her that all hope was not lost, that we could still do things together, and that I would do everything humanly possible to make sure that she still had a life to enjoy.

In the moment, it had little effect, but as time went by and she realized that I was there with her and for her all the way to the “last full measure,” she began, little by little, to come back to me and to life. There began flowers ever week, there were loving cards, there was unalloyed support and encouragement with every doctor's visit and there were constant reiterations of my absolute and undying devotion to her and of my willingness to do anything and everything to help her, to help us together, to have as good a life as we could have with each other.

Thankfully, little by little, with my constant encouragement and loving attention, she recovered the will to live, bringing back a faint shadow of the sparkling Susie that I fell in love with. I don't know where she found the inner reserves of emotional strength to keep going, but she did. The woman had a will of tempered steel, and with it we were able to enjoy two more years together before being parted. She soldiered on as best she could, suppressing the existential fear she must have felt, until cruel nature intervened one last time.

## *Four Surgeries and an Arm*

Dialysis requires the insertion of two needles into a vein, usually in the arm, so blood can be diverted to be cleaned externally. This can be accomplished in several ways, but the preferred approach is an operation to cross-splice a vein and an artery to divert some of the artery's blood flow to the vein. The increased flow causes the vein to enlarge, enabling more reliable needle insertions. This bypass is called a fistula.

The first stop was consultation with a specialist, the best in the area, to determine whether her veins were big enough for technicians to reliably find them. His office was in a town some distance from us, but the drive was through rural farm land and we always enjoyed it.

He pronounced her small veins to be barely within margin but sufficient and the fistula surgery was scheduled.

Yet another trauma awaited Susan as we attempted to get her into the car after that first surgery. Woozy from the anesthetic, she couldn't contribute much. Unfortunately, the aide who was sent out to help her was a frail older lady, unqualified by lack of strength to provide the necessary support and Susan fell, injuring herself. We raised holy hell with the hospital and thankfully the aid was reassigned to tasks more in keeping with her abilities.

As a final insult, the fistula created a problem called "arterial steal,"

where the diversion of blood supply to the hand below the fistula leaves the hand weak and tingling all the time. This only became worse as days turned into weeks and months. Exercising the hand helped but a little.



*A woman and her chicken*

Dialysis did not go smoothly, and the medical reverses she experienced on entering the process undoubtedly hastened the end. Despite the surgeon's optimism, dialysis technicians simply couldn't hit her small veins reliably. As a result, we were soon back in the specialist's office for the next intervention, an operation called "ballooning" to enlarge the

vein. This was the second of four operations, and the accumulated trauma did her little good. Worse, the technicians still couldn't reliably hit her veins.

At this point, the need for dialysis was critical and as a temporary expedient, a catheter, was inserted through her neck. This isn't preferred because the external connection can be a source of infection, but something had to be done right away. The positive of this approach was that hookup and disconnect was trivial.

The vein specialist wasn't satisfied with the catheter solution and urged Susan to have a graft implant. The graft replaces a segment of one of her veins with an artificial tube, the theory being that the tube was too big to miss. (Sadly, that turned out not to be true.) This was the fourth surgery, three on her arm and one on her neck, and it was the most traumatic yet. On the way home I had to pull over because she had to throw up. We had wisely brought a "barf bucket" just in case.

The bucket got most of it.

Besides being terribly sick, in her agony she was mortified. "Michael, I'm so sorry," she whispered.

I think this may have touched me more than just about anything associated with her struggles throughout this trial. In her dire situation she was apologizing for not being in control. I begged her not to apologize or worry about me or the car interior. I assured her that I knew she was suffering and couldn't help what happened. I then sounded a theme that was to be repeated many times over the next two years.

"Sweetheart, a long time ago we vowed to love one another 'in sickness and in health.' As far as I'm concerned it is an honor and a privilege to fulfill that vow, and I'm only sorry that you have to endure this. Please don't give up on us because I will follow that vow to you no matter what. I simply love you too much to do otherwise."

There were more problems inserting needles even with the graft, and her arterial steal loss of strength and feeling only got worse. I had to open all cans and bottles for her. For a woman as fiercely proud and independent as she was, it was difficult for her to accept but I tried my best to convince her that I would do anything physically possible to make her life bearable. Eventually she acquiesced and let me care for her without complaint. She was able to gain some enjoyment during the two years we had remaining.

## *"Don't Call Her Sweetie!"*

On her appointed day to begin her first dialysis session I drove her to the clinic and then, despite the estimated four-hour treatment time, waited to see what might happen.

It would be an understatement to say that her frame of mind going in was not good. Inside, Susan quickly established a certain reputation. About half an hour later a nurse came out to speak to me. The conversation was classic Susan.

It seems that the nurse, in leading Susan to her dialysis "seat" for hookup had unknowingly called her "sweetie," something that medical personnel routinely do with older patients. I suppose the words are meant to be a familiar and welcoming gesture, but it can be perceived as condescending. It was a complete failure with Susan. Already in a foul mood, she dropped the profanity equivalent of a nuclear bomb on that poor unsuspecting nurse. The nurse had come to me for help in understanding Susan.

I explained that Susan was a highly intelligent woman who had held great responsibility in an important job, and she had absolutely no patience with patronizing or condescending treatment. The nurse absorbed this and then commented thoughtfully, "Thank you for helping me understand her better. I think once we get to know each other we shall be best friends."

And it worked out exactly that way. They did become good friends and shared many stories with each other. A convincing point for Susan was that the nurse kept chickens. If Susan ever had regretted anything about our life in our house on a hill it was that she didn't keep chickens of her own. She was quite envious of our next-door neighbor who did.

She wasn't finished asserting her personality. I described her as "my little terrier" when she got her teeth into someone. After the first month, we got notice of the first routine staff review of her treatment. She went loaded for bear with a list of notes I had transcribed at her request. The room was full, including the nephrologist. It didn't go well. The meeting began but the doctor sat apart, ignoring us, instead

tap-taping on his phone. Susan threw sand in the works.

“Doctor, this meeting is about me. Put down your phone.” The doctor startled as from an electric shock. The phone hit the table immediately—but we were never invited to another review meeting.

These incidents circulated among the technicians—as a result of which they were a bit in awe of her. Others had probably wanted to say something comparably bold to management at some point—employees everywhere no doubt share that wish—but Susan had done it. She became quite popular, especially after I shared photos of her as a youth to a few of her favorites.

They often teased her about that first day. The admonition to new technicians was, “You can talk to Susie about anything you want—but don’t dare call her sweetie.” This usually brought laughter from the entire room.

One of the surprises of dialysis was the fact that rather than making her feel better after a treatment she was always fatigued and weak. Medically, we learned that the heart has to work harder during treatment because some of the blood is



*Christmas dinner feast in the works*

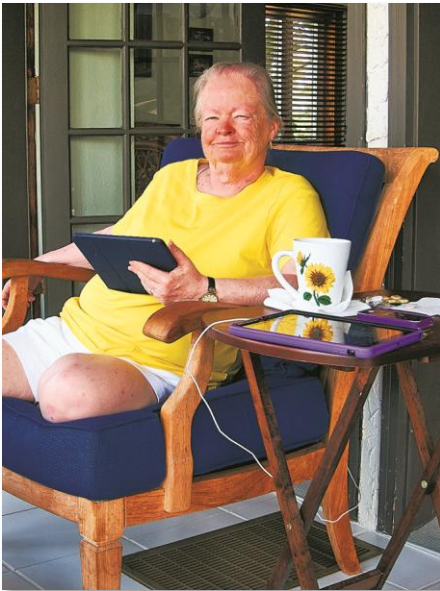
being removed continuously for cleaning. In any case, she wasn’t gaining strength. Something had to be done.

I convinced her that she should try physical therapy. As a tennis player I had rehabbed plenty of injuries as well as recovering from two operations over the years so I knew PT could be beneficial. We got our GP to give her a referral and we scheduled her PT visits to fall just before her dialysis time. Over a period of several weeks, she improved to the point where they discharged her; she had reached a

plateau where she could function. At this point she began driving herself to dialysis. The renewed feeling of independence brought back her old self-reliance and it improved her spirits tremendously.

## *"I'm Running Out of Body Parts!"*

As she did with everything else, she attacked the problem of her many illnesses with diligence and persistence. She had four doctors to which she made regularly scheduled visits, our GP, a cardiologist, a hematologist and a nephrologist. At one time she must have had a dozen prescriptions, all carefully tracked and organized. She complained that one of them made her "fuzzy" after taking it. She usually scheduled this at a time when she could lie down or just sit and watch television.



*Susan lounges with a novel while on vacation*

Then, there was the retina specialist. He wanted to give her shots directly into her eyeballs. After a couple, she never went back, preferring to limp along as she was.

Every time she would go to a doctor and a new complication would turn up, she would tell the doctor, "I'm running out of body parts!" It was a faint echo of the old Susie, finding humor in everything. I think it was her way of making light of a situation, the seriousness of which she didn't want to think about.

No longer able to work in her garden, we tried several alternatives before settling on the individual earlier, a handyman who could be her surrogate worker, as described in *Susie's Garden*. Her spirits improved considerably and we went flower shopping throughout that last spring. She replanted a total of 39 flower pots and she created a

## Susie's Garden

whole new herb garden, filling in nineteen different herbs and spices. She had big plans for much more—every available inch of her garden was to have its own selection. She made lists of everything already on hand, a list that will help me continue to maintain her garden as a tribute and a memorial to her.



After three and a half decades, the summer Chincoteague trips began to look problematic. Fortunately, the corporation that ran her local dialysis clinic had a facility on Eastern Shore. Although it was an hour-and-a-quarter drive from our rental house, but she wanted to make the trip. In the back of my mind, I was fulfilling my promise to her that she would see the ocean again. I would drive her there and wait for her during treatment.

The check-in procedure for the first visit was a surprise. Despite being a part of the same large corporation, this center made us fill out a whole new set of paperwork. In my opinion, everything they needed could have been transmitted electronically from her home clinic, but they weren't organized that way.

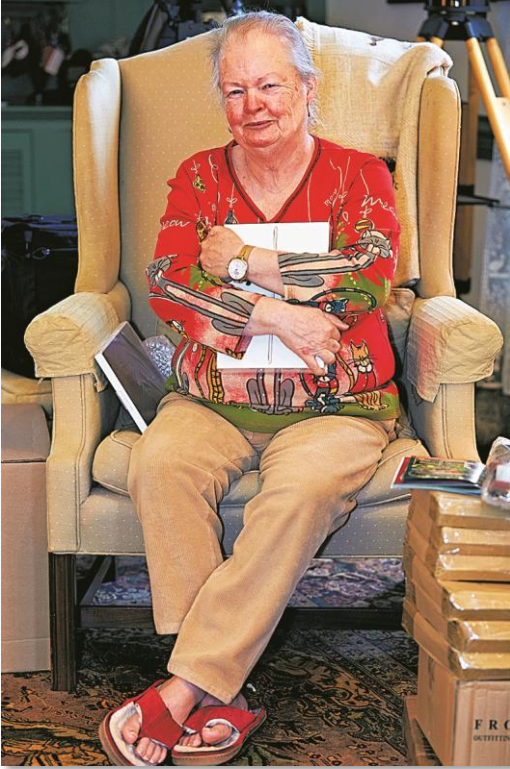


*Susan relaxes during city walkabout*

Sadly, the session didn't go well. First, after filling out paperwork for over half an hour she was made to wait an hour past her scheduled hook-up time to be called in. I read in the car and visited a small local museum while I waited. When I picked her up at the end of her treatment, she was so discouraged that she refused to go back again. Given her small veins and difficulty with needles, her technician hadn't been as successful as those at her home clinic—the process was

a trial by pain.

Also, many patients at this rural clinic had severe health complications, arriving by medical transport and wheeled in on gurneys. While their situation deserved compassion, it was so depressing to Susan that she simply couldn't take it. Since she had to have dialysis, we cut our trip short.



*Susan is delighted with a new tablet for Christmas*

The next year, she was adamant—she would not return despite repeated attempts at persuasion. There was one other clinic within driving distance of our rental house, but she refused that too. She insisted I go to be with our daughter and her family, and I did so, but in the end, I couldn't bear to be away from her and I cut my visit short. As previously mentioned, I had planned to fly her over the next year but that never happened.

When she broke down about having to go on dialysis, I had promised her that we would find a way for her to see the ocean again. The only solace I could find was that I had fulfilled that promise, but that one time was the last.

## The Last Dance



*There is always someone  
For each of us, they say  
And you'll be my someone  
Forever and a day  
I could search the whole world over  
until my life is through  
But I know I'll never find another you  
— "I'll Never Find Another Your"*

Written by Tom Springfield  
Recorded by Judith Durham and The Seekers



We had been going along smoothly for quite a while. Susan was driving herself to dialysis. We went to the grocery store together, she with her list of meats and fresh vegetables that only she could pick out and I with a list she prepared for me, of boxes and cans and bottles, items that required no judgement on my part. She still did the cooking—although we dined out a bit more than previously. And we dined well; our favorites were steak, lemon pepper chicken, scallops, haddock, stuffed peppers, Salisbury steak and mashed potatoes, BLT sandwiches, homemade soup, her special fried rice stuffed with everything in the refrigerator, and even dinner salads as a meal.

She now had a garden helper, and she enjoyed not only the renewal

of her garden but also being able to share her remarkable technical knowledge of gardening with someone. We enjoyed a dinner theater performance and had tickets for another on what would have been her 78<sup>th</sup> birthday.

She had gradually, almost imperceptibly gotten weaker over time and she spent hours each day on our front porch breathing in the fresh air, basking in the sun, soaking in the beauty and fragrance of her garden while listening to bird songs and communing with nature.

That all came crashing down on Saturday, June 21<sup>st</sup>.

## *Bleak Saturday*

She came home from dialysis and sat down on the sofa where she began to rock back and forth and moan. I asked her what was wrong.

“I feel terrible.”

She refused my offer of help, although she later accepted a dose of Acetaminophen. That seemed to help but did not relieve her suffering for long. I asked her if she wanted to go to the emergency room, but again she refused. Considering what happened later, I have to wonder if she had agreed might things have turned out differently? Knowing her, persuasion would have been futile so I watched and waited.

The rocking and moaning continued all evening until she finally fell asleep from exhaustion. She was better the following morning, but as the day wore on, she got worse again. Again, she refused medical intervention. By Monday afternoon she was willing to at least visit a quick care clinic. The diagnosis was that she probably had an infection—antibiotics were prescribed. This didn't change anything and by Tuesday evening she finally consented to go to the emergency room.

Throughout, she had refused to eat anything. This was in retrospect a far more ominous development than it first seemed—although at the time her visible symptoms were the overriding concern.

Blood tests showed markers for heart stress and the doctor recommended admittance. She wanted to know what I thought. I told her she should stay. But such was her desire to be at home that she refused and asked for discharge, in the hospital's jargon "against medical advice." Her symptoms didn't improve and by Sunday, over a week after the onset of symptoms she gave up and asked to be taken back to the hospital where she was immediately admitted.

Hospital tests showed that she had several problems. First, those heart enzyme markers were still there. She was given a choice of doing a diagnostic stress test or return to the catheterization lab for another operation. She had a fear of stress tests because her retinas once showed damage just after a chemical stress test and she attributed the blown retina blood vessels to that test. I had followed up with her ophthalmologist and he assured us that the likely cause was high blood pressure—which she definitely had.

In any case, she chose to go ahead with catheterization since anything serious that turned up in a stress test would have to be followed by a catheterization procedure anyway. The surgeon found a 70% blockage on one her major arteries, repaired with yet another stint. The blockages she initially experienced in her leg had now resurfaced as two separate heart attacks.

Sounding less ominous but equally fraught for her future, a bulge was found between two vertebrae in her neck. Of concern to the medical team was the fact that this type of spinal problem can serve as the site of persistent infections. More blood tests followed and an infection was confirmed. The fear was that it had gotten into her blood, which would make it very difficult to treat. I don't remember the name of the drug but the treatment involved a new medication that retailed for \$150 per pill—with no guarantee of success.



There followed nine days of treatment in the hospital, during which she merely dabbled at her food. I was with her an average of 10 or more hours a day, the only breaks coming when she was in dialysis or when I went home to care for our cat or sleep. Sometimes I would grab a bite in the cafeteria and sometimes I would pick up fast food

on the way home. The only exercise I got besides walking to and from the parking lot each day was an occasional foray to the hospital basement floor via a set of stairs from the lobby. Sleep was irregular and fitful. The effect on my own health built up imperceptibly, on top of pre-existing conditions, unnoticed at the time.

Eventually, the hospital decided it was time to discharge her, with the proviso that she continue taking medication at home while they continued to do outpatient blood testing to determine if her infection was subsiding. By this time, she was so weak that I was concerned about her getting in and out of the house for dialysis when she came home. Our back door, which leads to our garage, has a two-step drop to breezeway level. Getting out was simple enough but did she have the strength to get back in?

I asked for and she received a physical therapy evaluation on a stairwell inside the hospital. The result wasn't encouraging. Nevertheless, she wanted to go home, to be in familiar surroundings, to be with her cat and her flowers and her birds and her mystery movies. I made the judgement call that with my help she could make it. Our son-in-law volunteered to visit from an hour away three times a week to help if she didn't have the strength. We arranged medical transport and she came home, brought up our front porch steps in a lift chair.

## *False Dawn*

**S** in preparation I had bought a three-wheel walker but she felt she would be unstable on just three wheels. So, I returned the three-wheeler and ordered a four-wheel version. Meanwhile I went out that night and bought a non-wheeled version. I also bought skids to make pushing the walker forward easier. It happened to be painted black and she was quite proud of it, describing it as a Cadillac compared to hospital walkers. I didn't have the heart to tell her that it was standard pharmacy issue. She was able get around, haltingly but making progress. Needless to say, I hovered close by with every step. When Susan described her walker, our daughter suggested it needed bling, and offered to outfit it in Gothic style.

Even before we left the hospital I had arranged for home health care. I knew I couldn't do it by myself. For starters we would have biweekly nurse visits and physical therapy two or three times per week. Once home I went online and placed several more equipment orders. I ordered an aluminum ramp to make those back steps easier to navigate. There was a wheel chair for doctor visits and as a way of pushing her up the ramp. I ordered a rotating hospital table so she could eat conveniently at her sofa seat—a futile effort since she never resumed food despite our desperate admonitions.

Her first physical therapy session went well; we were both encouraged that she would recover her strength. The therapist suggested that we buy her a cane for the time when she would be able to go off-walker. She agreed and told me she didn't want a plain one. I took this for action and began scanning possibilities. Many decorated choices turned up—flowers, polka dots, birds, animals, etc. But to me none looked like Susan—for all of their decorativeness they looked cheap and common as grass. Then about half a dozen search pages down, I found what I was looking for.

There it was, a hand carved and painted chickadee hardwood handle atop a collapsible bronzed and brushed aluminum shaft, the most elegant cane I had ever seen—and the most expensive at four times the cost of cheaper models. Within moments it was on order, and Susan was delighted, especially with the bird-themed handle.

Sadly, she never got to use it.

## *The Sands of Time*

Throughout the two weeks after she was discharged, her physical condition, rather than improving, gradually declined to the point where she required considerable assistance to move about. Even the simplest physical therapy activities were beyond her. She continued to refuse food. The only thing she could manage, with considerable help, was to sit on our porch with her tea and gaze longingly at her garden.

Finally, on Monday, July 21 she asked to return to the hospital. We

called the rescue squad and they conveyed her to the emergency room where she was promptly admitted. There began another two weeks of watching her decline, she refusing to eat and struggling with the simplest tasks. I was there constantly, with only short breaks to go home and feed our cat. I usually arrived between 8 and 9 am and did not leave until after nurse shift change and first rounds, between 8 and 9 pm. The only exceptions were on her dialysis days, where I used the interval to attend to bill paying and other necessary tasks.

I tried staying overnight but found that attempting to sleep in the room's guest chair was untenable. Even the padded patient chair quickly became uncomfortable. She wished I could have done so. She would call me early in the morning, "Where are you?" Once she pleaded desperately, "Please come, please come." Other times, I got a call at midnight or past. Each time, I went back to the hospital and stayed with her until she fell asleep. In retrospect, one of my many regrets is that I didn't spend twenty-four hours with her every day.

She was understandably miserable. She constantly wanted to move back and forth between bed and the room's padded chair. With the back of the hospital bed raised she would gradually sink down into the bend, leaving her back in an awkward position. The seat of the room's padded chair was far too long for her 5-foot frame. As with the bed, she gradually slipped forward into an awkward position. She continued to refuse food.



The hospital staff was slow in responding to her lack of food intake. We had early on gotten a dialysis-specialized protein drink added to her food orders but for most of the first week the cafeteria simply didn't deliver them with meal trays. I lobbied vigorously for their inclusion, and meanwhile I brought her standard high calorie protein drinks from the cafeteria until they finally began making her special deliveries. She tried hard to drink them, but never managed the full calorie intake required to sustain health.

The hospital dietician and I discussed how to increase the calorie intake. The two options were a tube through her nose and a tube surgically implanted in her stomach. We decided to try the less

intrusive approach first. Was it the right choice? I don't know. In retrospect, maybe not.

She was scheduled for surgery and I accompanied her while they prepped her for the procedure. After a long wait, they came to get her. As they prepared to wheel her out, she looked up at me with those same shining little girl eyes that she had displayed just before her scalp cancer operation so many years ago. "I love you, Michael." I leaned over and kissed her forehead.

"I love you more than you can possibly know." With that she was taken away.

The tube stayed in place for hardly more than a day—it evicted itself by the natural action of her body combined with her inability to tolerate the obvious discomfort it caused. I redoubled my efforts to get her to drink her protein drinks. She needed three per day. I don't think she ever managed more than two.



Susan's care was attentive for the most part, and my intervention was usually at times when her needs fell outside of staff rounds windows. Nevertheless, if I had not been there as her advocate, lobbying for more attention to her diet and constantly urging nurses and nursing assistants to help her with toileting, moving from bed to chair and back, responding to pain medication and other needs, I suspect that she would have declined even more sharply. This highlighted what I believe to be an important patient care need—our hospital had no patient advocate program. I was Susan's advocate, a duty I carried out with determination and persistence. But what about patients who have no one else? And what about the matter of medical training? What did I miss that a trained patient advocate would have caught? In my opinion, a patient advocate staff should be a part of every hospital.

Even more worrisome than her physical condition, her mental acumen began to erode. Her voice became weaker and it took her longer to form sentences. I often had to lean close to understand what she was saying. And yet her inner fire was still there, and she

responded peevishly if someone tried to coax her along or complete sentences for her before she could answer. Despite that, she was increasingly in and out, lucid at times and not quite able to express thoughts at others. One night I spent half an hour trying to show her how to use the room's TV control, a device she had used without problems throughout both hospital stays up until her grip began to slip.

To see her magnificent mind, her intelligence, her spirit eroding before my eyes—which neither medical science nor I could reverse—broke my heart.

Early on in her second stay, a pair of nurses from the palliative care unit showed up. They gently explained that people on dialysis do well for a few years, but that the body eventually can't cope anymore and they begin to decline. She took this in and responded in a calm and rational voice.

"I've always said that I would never give up on life no matter what. But, in the presence of my husband," she said, without meeting my eyes, "I say now that I'm not so sure anymore." I felt a cold chill grip my soul. This was the first fissure in the granite wall of her hitherto unquenchable will to live and I felt as if a giant void had opened up and we were tumbling into the abyss.

The palliative care team left some literature with her to study. I followed them outside, out of her hearing.

"I appreciate that you are doing your job, and I'm sure you provide a valuable service. But, I cannot, I will not give up on her until medical science says there is nothing that can be done. Forgive me for being so blunt, but I'm not ready to entertain the implications of what you are offering."



Several days thereafter there occurred one of the most emotionally laden events of her final days, an event so poignant that it is almost better not to remember it. Her voice and ability to form thoughts and words having slowly declined into insensibility, one day out of the

blue she spoke in a voice so clear and strong that I could hardly believe it.

*“Thank you, Michael.”*

As if exhausted by the effort, she withdrew back into herself.

I leaned close, my heart pounding in my chest. “Sweetheart, why are you thanking me? What have I done?”

With her energies now spent, she could only whisper a reply.

*“For being you.”*

Even as I type these words, months later, the flood of adrenalin, of grief takes my breath away.

I held her hand. Visions of our life together leapt before me, a movie in hyper speed fast forward. I could only say, “I love you, sweetheart. My only regret is that I wish I had done more to deserve you.”

Some memories are so indelible, so burned into memory, that they haunt the psyche forever. Her six words, two triplets torn from the depths of her suffering soul, poised between life and the void, rise up to me as a cry of indescribable anguish, of realization, of a need to settle accounts with life while breath endured. In her darkest hour, I believe she was expressing the most profoundly important belief in her life, a summation—that she loved me, she loved the life we lived together and she forgave me for not being perfect.

Every time I read her words, the bottom drops out—a primal acrophobic fear as of teetering unsupported at the edge of an infinitely high and fatal precipice—tears well up uncontrollably. My conscience cries out, why could I not save her? Why didn't I find a way to reverse the ebb of time and carry her through her personal Valley of the Shadow safely to life? How can a man be so helpless when the life of the most precious person on earth hangs in the balance, powerless to forestall the outcome?

Everything else, even life itself, pales into insignificance.

## *Hummingbird*

Susan was steadily weakening and her mind was in and out, her voice faint and halting, her words slowly and haltingly formed. There came a time when the aids told me that she could no longer stand by herself to move from her hospital bed to the chair. Clearly, she was in precipitous decline. I came in the next morning to find her hands cold and turning blue. This was an immediate and dire danger sign, a time for real panic.

I asked for a meeting with everyone connected with her care. Rather remarkably, hospital staff responded immediately and we gathered that afternoon in a small room on her wing—the attending physician, two residents, the palliative care nurses and our daughter and myself. I basically said, what do we have to do to bring her back? There was a great deal of discussion about her condition, but the bottom line, expressed by the attending physician, was that unless her calorie intake increased there was nothing else that could be done.

After nearly an hour, we adjourned to Susan's room to bring her into the discussion. Susan was seated in her chair and she looked up with genuine interest as we all entered. The lead palliative care nurse presented the case to Susan. Susan considered this for a moment and then answered.

Gesturing to her nose, she said, “No more tube here.” She then gestured to her tummy, indicating the surgical insertion of a feeding tube in her stomach. “I’ll think about this.”

She paused, and then uttered the next to last cogent words she ever said.

*“I want to live.”*

My eyes were fixed on her and I was deeply moved by what she had just said. In my mind, her words justified my struggles to make sure she got the best care possible—nagging doctors, nurses and aids to come when she needed something.

Our daughter later related to me the reaction of the assembled

doctors behind me, out of my line of vision.

“They all had expressions of profound sadness on their faces.” They all knew, our daughter included, what I alone had not accepted.

There was no hope.



The next morning was a dialysis morning, a process that took four hours, from leaving her room for hookup to the machine to unhooking and returning. I used this time to get necessary things done at home or in town, but for some reason I came to the hospital early that morning. To my surprise, she was in her bed, asleep. I went looking for the shift nurse.

“Why is she back early?” I asked.

The nurse looked at me, her voice full of compassion. “Her blood pressure crashed during dialysis. The nephrologist pulled her off because when that happens dialysis cannot continue.” This made sense; dialysis puts an extra strain on the heart. If it is too weak to handle the extra workload, then that load must be removed else the risk is immediate.

I knew instantly what this meant. What the doctors, nurses and palliative care team had known for weeks and had tried to tell me flashed through my mind at once, blowing away my carefully constructed fabric of illusions, that we could cure her, that she would get well and come home with me, even if perhaps as an invalid, to be cared for lovingly and diligently.

Without dialysis, my once vital, lovely and supremely intelligent darling wife, the woman of my dreams, the mother of our children and the love of my life for 55 years of joy and happiness, had reached the end of the line.

When she entered the hospital, I promised her that when she recovered, I would bring her home so she could see and be in her garden again and abide once more in the comforting bosom of her home on a hill. Now, there was only one thing left to do.

I contacted hospice and began to make arrangements.



Hospice arranged for a home hospital bed to be delivered to our home the next morning. I also arranged medical transport for Susan. The head palliative nurse came by and I lost it completely, bawling uncontrollably right there in front of the nurses' station. For Susan, there was nothing more that could be done other than to keep her as comfortable as was possible. The nurses and aids were all remarkably sympathetic and compassionate—they had known for a long time but they all recognized that I hadn't been willing to face what their experience and professional detachment had told them days ago.

The next morning, after confirming arrangements at the hospital, I went home to meet the hospital bed delivery. Our daughter remained behind to oversee medical transport and to clean out her room. The bed was delivered and assembled in good order and soon thereafter the ambulance arrived.

On Wednesday August 6, Susan was home at last.

Hospice was there to help—a nurse or aide would be on duty at all times. The nurse gave instructions for care, and our daughter listened intently and made careful notes. She had accepted responsibility for caring for her mother in a way that I could not. I was simply too distraught, too much in shock to be useful for anything.

After Susan was settled, I approached the bed and told her in as kindly and unemotional a voice as I could manage,

“Sweetheart, I promised you that I would bring you home so you could see your garden again. We're finally here. Would you like to see it now?”

There was an imperceptible nod so we opened our front double doors and rolled her bed into the entrance foyer. She was able to turn her head and look out. By now, she had little control of her faculties, but I thought I could see a wistful look cross her face as she gazed out the

door at her loving creation of many years.

After a long while, we rolled her bed back into the living room, but she soon let us know that she wanted to look out again. It was the last time she looked, and just about the last time she was able to do anything of her own volition. She slept off and on for the rest of the day. Our daughter diligently followed nurse's instructions with regard to care. I watched helplessly as Susan's life force slowly ebbed before our eyes.

At one point, Susan called out our daughter's name. It was the last cogent thing she ever said. Sometime later, she tried to speak but what came out was confused babble. We all gathered around and asked her to repeat several times, and each time the same sequence of unintelligible syllables emerged, but none of us could understand.

"I'm so sorry sweetheart, but we can't understand what you are saying. I wish we could but we just can't."

She didn't try again.

The rest of that day and the next, there was little change. She breathed, she slept, her eyes occasionally opened, but she was beyond the power of movement.



Early Friday morning I was awakened by our daughter. "Dad, come quickly. I think Mom is gone."

I hurriedly dressed and went down to the living room, dreading what I would find, what would come next.

"I came down early to check on her and found her with her eyes open. I left the room for a moment and when I came back her eyes were closed. I can't find a pulse."

The bottom dropped out of my world as I approached the bed. I looked closely. I called out eagerly, "Her eyes are still open!" They were narrow slits just barely open enough for her to see out. I hoped then, as I do now, that she could see me. I could barely breath as I

leaned close and kissed her forehead, taking her cold, limp hand in mine.

“Sweetheart, I’m here. I love you. I love you more than any man has ever loved a woman.” Then, in the agony of growing grief, I managed to tell her,

*“If there is a beyond, I will find you when I get there and we will be never be apart again.”*

Were her eyes following me behind those slitted lids as I told her how much I adored her? I don’t know, but I would like to think they were.

After I spoke her eyes closed for the last time. Did she remain alive and awake through the previous night in order to say goodbye to us? I would like to think that too. The thought is profoundly moving—a tribute to her indomitable inner will. It tells me that she loved me, as I loved her—and still do—up until the ultimate moment.

In any case I am grateful to whatever spirits that guide our destiny that I was granted the opportunity to say farewell to the woman who had given my life meaning and happiness for 55 years. The memory of that moment is incredibly painful, and I cannot recall it without tears welling up, even now. But the thought of missing the opportunity to be with her in her final moment on earth, to tell her how very much, how desperately much I loved her, had always loved her, how I wished to join her when the time came, is too horrible to contemplate.

I was numb after that. We called hospice and a nurse came to examine and pronounce. The hospice grief counselor came to check on our daughter and I. A friend arrived to look in on us. They all found me inconsolable. Every time I tried to speak, I broke down and sobbed uncontrollably.

After everyone had left, we called the funeral home and their hearse came to get her. As they prepared to lift her out of the hospital bed, I kissed her forehead one last time, told her again that I loved her and bid her a final farewell.

After that, our daughter and I were left alone, to fend for ourselves

without a wife and a mother as best as we could.



Birds played a formative part of Susan's life as a young girl and she brought her love of birds with her to our marriage. Her gift to me was leading me to bird photography with our visits to the wildlife refuges on Eastern Shore. So perhaps it was karma that birds had one more act to play.

In the shock of that last morning, after everyone had left and while we were waiting for the funeral home, daughter and I went out on the front porch to look out over Susan's beloved garden and contemplate the loss of a past and the bleak vision of an uncertain future, barely holding ourselves together while facing life without her.

As we stood there, silently comforting each other, a ruby-throated humming bird appeared from nowhere and buzzed up to us. It hovered for a few moments, mere inches away, looking us over, and then flew off.

I hadn't seen one for weeks because Susan hadn't been there to refill our nectar feeder. After marveling at this remarkable and unexpected apparition, our daughter, recalling spirit beliefs in the connectedness of life and nature as old as mankind, posed the great mystery— Why was it there? Why had that hummingbird come to us in that exact moment, after weeks of absence? Was it coincidence? Symbolic? The wisdom of wild creatures? Or, just a random pause in its flight path? Reason says the latter, but I'm not so sure; our daughter thought that it might have come to say goodbye on Susan's behalf— or perhaps it had come to gather her soul and carry it away to a better place, free of suffering.

Whatever the answer, that experience is inextricably woven into the bitter-sweet tapestry of Susan's magnificent life, of my undying love for and devotion to her and of that horrible day—turbulent memories that lie ever present just below the surface, flickering shadows of a doomed past that never go away.

One cannot dwell on them overly long for that way lies madness.

## Susie's Garden



*To me, Susan will always be the beautiful young woman  
I married 55 years ago*

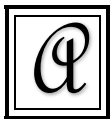
## Susie's Garden

## Epilogue



*When the stars threw down their spears  
And water'd heaven with their tears:  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*  
— “The Tyger”  
William Blake

*There isn't anybody but me. . .  
here alone in the dark,  
I miss you dreadfully.*  
— “All You Zombies”  
Robert A. Heinlein



As our courtship turned to love and love to engagement all those decades ago, Susan and I talked endlessly of the many things we wished for in our life to come, of a home of our own, of children, of friendships and careers and vacations and hobbies. We even talked about the quiet satisfaction of growing old together after a life rich in love, in shared experience, in the joys of raising children, in the comfort of a home where we could abide together until the end of our days.

For the most part, we lived that dream. There were surprises along the way and trials to overcome as well. But had we foreseen the path

our shared life would take I don't think that, on balance, we would have proceeded differently—the exception being, of course, her health. Life with Susan was new and fresh, exciting every day. However, nothing remains the same forever, and so it was with us.

When her health began to fade, I promised her that I would do everything possible to care for her so that we could continue to enjoy life together. I explained that my inspiration was the example set by my great-grandparents. My great-grandfather Lewis Alexander had cared diligently and tenderly for his invalid wife, my great-grandmother Rosa Lee, for decades after her health began to decline. With his devoted care they lived to a rare old age, 93 and 90, and when the end came, he passed a year and a half after my great-grandmother. I told Susan that I wanted that same togetherness for us, and I would do whatever it took to care for her.

A huge part of my sorrow and regret at her passing traces to the fact that we were denied that golden time together. Her health declined imperceptibly over a long period of time and then crashed in less than two months. Someone recently told me that caring for an invalid is a burden and it is better for the carer if the invalid passes quickly. With the utmost restraint I barely managed to control my voice; as politely as I could manage, I informed him that he didn't know what he was talking about. It would have been a privilege to care for Susan for as long as we both breathed.

The best analogy I have found to explain my love for her and my enduring desolation at her loss is that in some inexplicable way I was, and still am, addicted to her, to being with her, to loving her, to being loved by her. I was utterly dependent on her as a talisman against loneliness and a life without love. She was the life force that gave birth to a new dawn each day of our lives. The day she passed, my spirit died with her.

I take flowers to her grave once a week and will do so as long as flowers bloom and I can lift a hand to hold them. I talk to her constantly and I measure each thing I do against what she would have wished of me. I have thrown nothing of hers away because to do so would be a small act of forgetting—and that, I cannot do.

## Susie's Garden

I look around our house, and I am struck with the realization that everything in the house, *everything*, is an expression of her inspiration, her will, her creativity. All the art on our walls, all the furniture in each room, the rugs on the floor, the bird carvings on our living room shelves, the dishes in the dining room, the silver in the cabinet, the lighting and plumbing fixtures she chose when we renovated our house, the plants in front of each window, the decorations at Christmas time, the garden outside. Everything bears the stamp of her conscious choice—even the floor plan, her creation of so many decades ago. I am surrounded by her, engulfed by her memory.

Amid enduring grief over her loss, I am left to ask why Susan did not take steps that would have preserved her health? It would have meant giving up nicotine in all forms, to which she was almost certainly addicted. The side effects of nicotine mirror the conditions she developed—heart problems, high blood pressure and pre-diabetes—and those conditions in turn contribute to renal failure.

Further back in time, I believe it is possible that the cumulative effects of abandonment by her father, overbearing and controlling treatment by her stepfather, and the constant loss of childhood friendships brought about by frequent military transfers, contributed to her choice to take up smoking and thence to nicotine addiction. If there is a villain in her past, in my view it traces back to the treatment she received from her father and stepfather, particularly the latter.

Did those rejections and disruptions leave a permanent scar on her psyche? Was there something more buried in the past that she never revealed? Did the many times my own imperfections as a husband disappointed or hurt her contribute? Or are these merely reflections of my own illusions—born of grief, guilt and regret—no more than shifting shadows on the wall, phantasms without substance?

There are no answers, only the pain of lost love.



I wrote a poem for her while I was in college, years before we met.

## Susie's Garden

I had been an introverted and lonely young lad during my growing up years and the poem emerged from a deep-seated need to escape the walls of that prison. Although the need was buried below conscious thought, inchoate and almost inexpressible, I knew deep in my soul that the only thing I wanted in life, the key to unlocking the gate of loneliness, the only thing that would ever make me whole, was the love of a good woman. I hoped rather than believed that she was out there somewhere, but I didn't know how to find her. But I knew I had to do so or wander aimlessly through a pointless life. "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows."

To my everlasting happiness, I did find her. Or perhaps we found each other. From the Dedication page, emblematic of my search for her:

### *Search by Night*

*Beneath the Moon, a darkling land,  
Bathed in silvery light,  
Waits for the kiss of a falling star  
To end the lonely night.*

*Soft and new on the night wind's breath —  
How cool it feels upon a tear —  
Soundless words drift on its wings,  
That only the Moon can hear.*

*The land grows dim, the silver fades,  
Lost in a lifeless dawn —  
Come quickly now while night remains,  
Before the magic is gone.*

— Michael, 1966

For 55 years Susan was the falling star that illuminated my life. She was the guiding light who was always there, the love of my life and the fulfillment of youthful dreams. As a young woman she was achingly beautiful, not movie star glitzy but rather girl next door beautiful. The latter is far superior as a life partner; there was never any false pride or vanity—what you saw was the authentic Susan. And

## Susie's Garden

yet, she never believed she was beautiful no matter how many times I told her. There was neither vanity nor false modesty.

She was self-reliant, competent, outspoken and principled. She was unyielding on important points, and she always did what was right—her personal integrity and sense of propriety were off-the-charts. she was hardworking, she never complained about anything, she was dedicated to her family and friends, and she was a doting mother to our two young children.

She was fun-loving and she had a ready smile and a cheery greeting for friends. She loved flowers, birds and cats. In fact, she loved all living things, and made a point to put out various types of food for all the forest critters. She was feisty, impish, whimsical, mischievous, teasing and even a bit little girl silly at times. She had a keen sense of humor and she was a bit of a prankster where I was concerned.

She was highly intelligent and she loved puzzles— the more difficult the better. Her favorite entertainment was trying to figure out the who-done-it in mystery novels and movies. She was altogether fun to live with for the 55 years we journeyed through life together, and we laughed for the sheer joy of sharing life's adventures together every day. As her mother once said to us, "you two laugh a lot." I can't think of a higher compliment from a mother-in-law, because it meant that the most important person in her life, her daughter, was happy with hers.

Dearest lady, I am eternally grateful that you said yes when I asked you to travel life's journey with me. Without you, life would have been a barren desert of endless loneliness. With you, life has been a new adventure every day, full of love, laughter and happiness, with the promise of more on the morrow. Farewell for now, but fear not; I'll be with you again one day, holding hands as we walk through meadows of flowers together while our cats chase butterflies before us and birds wing high overhead, lifting their joyous morning song to your eternal spirit. . . Bless you, dearest one, for you are my everything.

~ finis ~

## Susie's Garden

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