

Spring 5-9-2017

Highway 11: A Memoir

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Recommended Citation

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Highway 11

a memoir

by Judy Benowitz

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Introduction

When my sister, Valerie, committed suicide, I looked back to the choices we made and wrote this book. *Highway 11* is the title of my 60,000 word memoir. I grew up on that swath of road between Monroe and Winder, Georgia. It was a whiskey soaked, Southern Baptist upbringing, in a blue collar family. I moved away, as soon as I bought a car, while Valerie got pregnant in high school and lived in Monroe all her life with her husband and two children. I knew there was a better life out there and set out to find it.

My first stop was Atlanta, in 1969, for the “Age of Aquarius,” where I was a hippie and protested the Vietnam War. I lived out of a suitcase for ten years as a flight attendant for United Airlines in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Honolulu. During that time, I married Bob, a nice Jewish boy, and converted to Judaism in 1973, which was the biggest impact on my life.

Valerie got her GED went on to earn a master’s degree in journalism and became a freelance writer. She wrote a novel the year before she died. It is a southern gothic tale with a Eudora Welty style and voice. She had an agent, but the book was never published.

Bob and I moved to Newport Beach, California for twenty years and reared our three children in the Jewish faith. We returned to Georgia for the last seven years of my mother’s life. Valerie lived near Mother and Dad all her life and cared for them as they aged. I wanted to help, but Valerie didn’t want me interfering in our mother’s care. When

I put Mother in the nursing home, Valerie became depressed. I knew she needed help. I wanted to rescue her, but I was too late.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Linda Niemann for taking an interest in my work and encouraging me to take advanced courses in Nonfiction. Hers was my first class at Kennesaw State University, and three years later she served on my capstone committee and advised me on how to construct my story.

Dr. William Rice teaches Fiction at Kennesaw State University. After studying with him, I published, "Buck," my first fiction that I produced in his class. He also served on my capstone committee and emphasized craft in workmanship. His careful editing of my final project taught me a lot about writing.

I would like to thank my loving husband, Robert Benowitz, a retired businessman, who is my biggest fan and toughest critic. He patiently listened to my stories and tried not to fall asleep.

My three accomplished children supported me and encouraged me to keep writing: Shayne, a travel writer in Miami, and Kristy, in public relations in Miami, and my son, the actor, Brett, lives in New York.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Jim Elledge who was my advisor at Kennesaw State University for three years. He accepted me into the Master's program, after I started out on a Certificate program.

I would also like to acknowledge Terri Brennan who was my first contact at Kennesaw State University. I was looking for an online course to learn to write, when she informed me of the program for seniors who may attend classes and only pay for parking. She guided me through the process of application and gave me very good advice in starting with the Certificate program and then advancing to a Master's. Today she is advising me on my capstone requirements.

I also would like to thank the students at Kennesaw State University who are so polite and kind in answering my questions and giving me direction, as well as all the professors who take a keen interest in teaching. I will miss the learning community of Kennesaw State University.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the colorful characters in my stories, and the friends and family who shaped me. I wish to honor them by putting them on the page.

1**Valerie**

(1960-1969)

When my sister died, I was in Athens for my daughter's graduation from the University of Georgia. The sun shone brightly through the windshield, as Kristy talked about the weekend and her plans after graduation, which included a move to Dubai. I think back to that day in my life-- the last day in my sister's life.

Valerie drives her ten- year- old Camry onto the dirt road which cuts across the open pasture of her forty- acre farm. A dust cloud kicks up behind her, as she winds past a hundred- year- old cattle loading dock. A crisp, warm day in Georgia, but Valerie doesn't notice. She parks next to her house, a small, one- room cabin with a wrap-around, covered porch. Two fishing ponds out front are separated by a grassy walkway. A hammock hangs between two large sweet gum trees.

Valerie's steps are heavy as she enters the house with her small packages. It is almost Christmas, and she has bought books for her grandchildren. She carefully wraps each one leaving them on the kitchen counter along with a receipt that reads 4:08 pm. In the bathroom, she opens the medicine cabinet and takes four Xanax. Outside, she finds the garden hose and duct tape in the shed. She comes back for a paper and pencil as almost a second thought. In a wooded area on her property, she parks in a small clearing and gets out to attach the garden hose to the tail pipe.

After my sister died, I wrote this book. I looked back to our childhood for a clue that would indicate that Valerie had a suicidal personality. I thought maybe I had contributed to it by lording over her like a big sister, sucking all her power and energy and using it to advance myself. Maybe one day I would be suicidal. Could it be a defective gene that shows itself later in life? Two of our cousins also took their lives. Does it run in the family? Is it depression? Could I have saved her?

“Don’t beat yourself up. You are not a trained clinician. You could not know what to do,” my friend, the marriage and family counselor, said.

This is what suicide does to a family. The questions never stop. “It’s the gift that keeps on giving,” the Rabbi said, when I told him why we could not come to the Temple that night. My husband, Bob, and I had just returned home from visiting Valerie’s family, when the Rabbi called.

He wanted our son, Brett, to address the congregation about being a college freshman. I was stunned that the Rabbi called me on the most terrible day. “You are an angel sent to me today. My sister committed suicide.” The phone suddenly went dead. I thought maybe he wasn’t prepared to counsel me and hung up. He called back ten minutes later and told me his brother committed suicide years ago. We talked for a long time, and he helped me get through that day.

As I examine my shared history with Valerie, flashbulb memories return to Highway 11, that swath of road between Monroe and Winder, Georgia, where we grew up. It was a whiskey soaked, Southern Baptist upbringing, in a blue-collar family.

“Follow the beer cans to Winder,” Uncle Perry Hugh said, because no liquor was sold in Monroe, but Winder had plenty of beer joints. He and my dad frequented the beer joints of Winder or bought moonshine from the local distillers.

My dad drove to a house deep in the woods for moonshine. Down a dirt road, the house sat in a clearing. It stood on rock pilings off the ground. Dogs lounged about in the dirt yard.

“Stay in the car.” Dad slammed the door.

We three kids, ages 8, 6, and 4, sat in the back seat of that 1939 Buick Roadmaster, convertible with the rusted-out floor board, waiting while our father walked up the broken wood steps to the porch with no furniture. He disappeared inside the darkness of the open door to make the transaction. After a few minutes, we saw little black faces peeking out.

One by one, they stood in the doorway, stuck out their tongue and disappeared. A barefoot boy came first, maybe 8 years old, wearing white shorts and no shirt. Next, came a girl with braids sticking out. She wore a white dress made from a flour sack. We could tell it was once a flour sack because “Pride of Sussex” was still there though upside down, and only part of it showed. A smaller boy wearing a white shirt and shorts stepped into the doorway. The little girl came last: a two-year-old in a flour sack dress also stuck out her tongue and disappeared. Those kids lined up on the porch-- a parade of pink tongues against black faces-- as our father walked down the steps with his purchase.

We called him Dan, because Mother did, even though all the church ladies said we would go to hell for calling our father by his first name.



"Never mind those busy bodies," Mother said. "You'll have to do something much worse than that to go to hell." Mother had a way of taking the fear out of life. While she practiced the strict rules of the Southern Baptist religion by taking us kids to church and Bible school, Dan sat on the couch watching Billy Graham on TV. When the preacher stopped by to invite Dan to church, he hid in the bedroom until the preacher drove off then went back to watching TV.

Church was women's work. I saw there was more than one way to find God. I married Bob and converted to Judaism.

"Never marry a drinking man," was my mother's advice, and I didn't.

Dan drank white lightn' from a mason jar. I tasted it once, after I saw him gulp it from a paper sack in the kitchen. Well, I didn't really taste it because, as soon as I brought the jar to my lips, the fumes were so strong my eyes and nostrils burned. The Indians were right. It was fire water. I understood why it knocked him into a snore on the couch.

He spent many weekends that way. Mother complained constantly that they never did anything because he was drunk. He wasn't a mean drunk. In fact, he was very sweet. Monday morning he was up at dawn to go to work in his red truck for the REA (Rural Electric Association). A lineman for the county, the man Glen Campbell sang about, he wore blue work clothes. I remember many nights waking to see Dan dressed in his rain gear, mother's anxious expression, and the storm thundering and lightening outside.

"Where're you going, Dan?" I asked.

"He's going on a trouble call. Someone has lost their electricity," Mother said.

Dan looked large and fearless dressed for the storm to save the world from power outages. He got that job, when he came back from World War II in 1946. The REA was part of President Roosevelt's 'New Deal' to employ servicemen returning from the war. An easy transition for Dan, since he ran telegraph poles throughout South Africa.

Stationed in Johannesburg, or as he called it 'J-burg.' He talked often about his experiences there, until we told him, "We've heard that story a million times." Then he stopped. When he came home from the war, he never wanted to leave again. He married my mother, after she said, "How 'bout it?"

They were sweethearts before Mother joined the Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services) based in Washington D.C. She along with 27,000 other women supported the war effort. I learned after she died that he never wrote to her, while he was away. Afraid he wouldn't come back, he wanted her to find someone

else. Who knows? Maybe he really hoped Mother would marry another man, so she wouldn't nag him the rest of his life.

Mother once told me, Dan was falling down drunk, when she met him. I asked her why she wanted him. She said she loved him. I guess she thought she could fix him. Women do that. They pick a fixer upper to marry, and then complain when he won't fix. I learned that from Dr. Laura, a radio talk show host. People would call in complaining about their love life. Her first question was, "Were they like that when you met them?" Invariably the answer was, "Yes." Then Dr. Laura in all her wisdom would ask, "What did you expect?"

Dan told some great drinking stories. One of my favorites was when he and Perry Hugh picked up some moonshine one Saturday afternoon. My brother, Wayne, and our cousin, Jimmy, sat in the back seat with the liquor. When the car broke down on the side of the road, Perry Hugh and Dan got out and started walking to the neighbor's house to make a phone call, leaving the two boys in the car. The police stopped to offer their assistance, when Wayne hung out the back window holding a paper sack and shouted, "Hey, Dan, you forgot your liquor."

These memories aren't mine, but stories repeated often to the boisterous laughter of my aunts and uncles at family gatherings. One memory I do have is sitting outside on a paint-chipped bench rocker with my dad on a hot summer night before air conditioning. It was the coolest place to be in the south. Under the dark, star-lit sky he sang, "Carolina

Moon,” in his booming voice—first, way down low and then up high. I can still hear his baritone voice. He smelled of hooch and Camel cigarettes, a salty blend I will always remember.

During my teenage years I asked him "What are you living for?" His answer was simple: “to provide for you kids.”

Dan was the sweet one, while Mother could be strict.

She was a deeply religious woman, though she was given to cursing: “shit-ass,” was a description she often used. She could out preach any man of the cloth that came through Mt. Creek Baptist Church, where she sang in the choir in her off-key alto voice ever searching for harmony. She taught Sunday school and wrote the Mt. Creek Baptist Church news for the local newspaper, and she threw me out, when I was eighteen.

Mother thought I needed direction in life, so she opened the front door. Dan had cosigned with me to buy a little yellow MGB sports car, the first new car in the family. I remember the scene at the dealership, when my parents sat beside me to purchase the car.

“Dan has to be responsible for everything. Can’t she sign for herself and keep us out of it?” mother asked.

“Sorry, she has to be 21.” The dealer pushed the paperwork in front of Dan.

I thought Mother had killed the deal, till my dad spoke up.

“I’m signing the papers.”

“You have delusions of grandeur,” Mother said, annoyed that I bought such an extravagant car.

She was probably right.

Mother was the punisher, the disciplinarian, the one who cut the blood out of your legs with a switch, the one who said, “you can't go, you can't have it, we can't afford it.”

While living at home and commuting to work in Atlanta, I had to leave at 6:30 am. Dan made breakfast for me every morning and sat and talked to me. He enjoyed it. I couldn't eat at that hour, but he wanted to do it, so we talked every morning. A kind man, who angered my mother by his attention to me. She thought he spoiled me. I thought he was just glad I had a job. In fact, I did not last long in any job, and I dropped out of the University of Georgia on scholastic probation. I had a lot of quit in me, and it would be years before this late bloomer would learn to stay the course.

“You're causing problems between your father and me. You need to move out.”

That was how she gave me direction out the door.

I moved to Athens to work for Southern Bell and lived in the YWCA. On a hot sultry night, I sat with my boyfriend, David, in his car making out. We had the windows down to get some air, but the mosquitos ate us alive, so we rolled up the windows and steamed up the little Sunbeam Alpine sports car.

Sweating and trying to maneuver between the steering wheel and gear shift to find a good position, we finally gave up at 2:00 am. David walked me to the door, but it was locked. I rang the bell and waited for the housemother to appear in her robe and let me in. I stole past her sheepishly, hair a mess, and makeup smeared, hoping she would forget about it. She did not.

"You have to leave," she said the next morning. "Pack your things."

The YWCA annex down the block had an opening, so I moved there. The black maid wearing a starched white uniform worked for both Y's. While dusting the curved wooden stairway in that antebellum house, she recognized me. We made eye contact, as I walked upstairs. She squealed.

Mother was helping me move in, when the housemother appeared at my door.

"You were evicted from the YWCA. You can't stay here either."

Mother stepped out into the hall to speak privately with the housemother to find out why I was evicted. She flew back inside like a whirling dervish wielding a knife and slashing the canvas of a green nude my art student friend painted of me-- cursing and throwing things back into their boxes. I guess she wanted to destroy all the evil influences in my life. This would be another of many evictions to come, but I was never YWCA material, which is probably why I'm Jewish today.

In my yellow MGB with the top down, I drove to look at an apartment in Atlanta. I stopped at a red light and heard someone call, "Judy." I looked over at the car next to me and saw a pretty black girl smiling with big white teeth.

"Hi, who are you?" I asked.

"Precious."

"Oh, hi Precious. It's good to see you."

"You too, Judy." She drove off. She was in my graduating class.

I remember the first time I saw Precious. In the fall of 1965, three black students

integrated Monroe High School. Superintendent of Schools, Clyde Pearce, hand-selected Precious Journeygone, Dorcus Waters, and one black boy, Antwon Jones, as the smartest and most likely to succeed in a hostile environment.

Precious's eyes fixed on her books, as she sat in my tenth- grade classroom. She wore a plaid shirt waist dress with pleats ironed to perfection. The cream in her hair straightened it to the popular bubble style. Everyone watched her and tried to get her attention. A spit ball landed on her desk. She ignored it.

The teacher called out her name.

“Here,” she answered in a deep voice.

Everyone laughed. The next day, she didn't answer the roll. The teacher knew she was there. We all knew she was there.

Elaine Dial, the class clown, sat in front of Precious and talked to her out loud to entertain everyone, when the teacher wasn't in the room.

“Precious, what are you doing? Can I borrow your comb? Precious, you forgot to shave your legs last night.”

One day, Elaine pulled black fuzz off the sweater in front of her and stuck it to the armpit of her own yellow cardigan, so it looked like hair. She raised her arm and pointed with her #2 yellow pencil.

“Precious, this is what your armpit looks like,” she said.

Precious sat stony faced for a few seconds then cracked into a laugh. The classroom made its first black connection, and we all laughed, as Mrs. Robinson strolled

back in.

Ol' Lady Robinson was a tough old bird, who wore spiked heels, slim skirts with fitted jackets, red lipstick, and tight curls. She had a pointed nose, eyeglasses with pointed frames. Her shoes had pointed toes, and her red finger nails were filed to a point. Tall in her seat, she saw everyone from her chair. Other teachers we reduced to a frustration of tears, not Mrs. Robinson. She stopped us with a word or a look.

In front of the class that day, each student recited the preamble to the Gettysburg Address. Precious took her turn. She stood there looking out to the sea of white faces, some angry, some waiting for her to make a mistake, so they could laugh. After a few seconds, she took a breath and opened her mouth. We waited, but no words came out. She lowered her head and cried. I wanted to cry, too.

Mrs. Robinson quickly came to her side and hugged her. She walked her back to her seat speaking quietly to her. No one made a sound, as we realized the huge responsibility on the shoulders of that young girl chosen to integrate our school.

"Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal:" a powerful lesson in history that day.

I felt a little like Precious: starting a new life, in a new apartment, in a new city, with new roommates. My life changed quickly, and I hung on for the adventure with some of the characters in Atlanta for the Age of Aquarius, in 1969. I moved in with Linda and Michelle.

2

Atlanta and the Age of Aquarius

(1969-1970)

Hip and cool, Michelle was from Miami. She had just transferred from the University of Florida to Georgia State. She wore bell bottom pants with Indian print madras shirts, which were a popular style. She had long straight hair with bangs, like most of us did. She was street smart and book smart. She ran the show, and we followed.

Linda, a dental hygienist for Michelle's brother, Hugh, was from Snellville, a small town outside Atlanta. A little country girl with big blue eyes, her mother was from London which added a little intrigue. Linda's sister, also a dentist, was married to Hugh. It was all in the family.

My roommates and I went out every weekend to the various parties hosted by the large apartment complexes. With live bands and a cash bar every weekend, The Le Mans Apartments was the place to be for those under thirty.

Tall, handsome, Ted Dodd was a regular at the parties, but he only danced to slow songs. We dated a few times. In his apartment one night, he opened the frosted- over freezer in his refrigerator and pulled out two ice trays. He ran them under hot water in the sink slammed them on the yellow Formica counter top and cracked them open by their

handles with his large hands. He filled a tall, yellow tumbler to the brim with ice and grabbed the handle of Stole Vodka pouring a generous amount into the ice. Then he popped open the yellow can of tonic and topped it off. He sliced the lime into quarters and twisted one over the large glass.

“Want one?”

“Yes.” He was quite the mixologist.

We sat on the couch, while my friend, Debbie, and Ted’s roommate, Joe, sat in chairs pulled from the kitchen table. Ted worked in construction, so he had a nice apartment. The yellow shag carpet matched the color scheme running throughout the apartment. Even the walls were painted yellow. In the ‘60s, that yellow color, or an avocado green, was the popular choice in décor.

After a few drinks, Ted abruptly turned me over his knee and spanked me really hard.

“Stop, you're hurting me.”

“Don’t you like that?”

“No, I don’t. What’s wrong with you?”

“I thought you would like it.”

“Jesus, I would like to go home.”

“Ok. Jesus, don’t get so excited. I’m making another drink, then we’ll leave.”

He went back to the kitchen with its linoleum floor, now splashed with liquor, and

made another Vodka Tonic. Ted always had a tall Vodka in the cup-holder of his Grand Torino.

The four of us piled into Ted's car and drove onto the freeway. A car behind us brightened his lights indicating for Ted to move out of the left lane. Ted grabbed an AK47 rifle from under his seat with his left hand. He held it out the window firing off three rounds into the air.

“Thff! Thff! Thff!”

“Take that motherfucker," he said. "Don't mess with me.”

The car backed off. Then we heard gunshots coming from behind us.

“Get down. He's got a gun!”

Ted pushed me to the floor. All I could see in the dark were his feet stomping first the accelerator then the brakes. He swerved the steering wheel to the left then the right, trying to pass the car in front of us.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

“Damn, he hit my car!”

Debbie and Joe dove to the floor of the back seat. I bounced below the steering wheel, bruising my back with the door handle, trying not to roll onto Ted's feet and disturb their work. We flew 100 mph down the 75 freeway outside Atlanta, an easy target for the car behind us.

“Shit! Hang on.” Ted passed a car and exited the freeway on two wheels.

The chasing car followed. Suddenly, we reached a dead end.

“Oh fuck! Get out of the car. Head for the woods.”

The three of us scurried into the woods. Ted shut off all the lights and stood behind the car, his gun trained on the road military-style. He waited a long time. The car didn't come.

“He's not coming,” he shouted. "Holy shit that was wild. You can come back now. He's not coming.”

We cautiously walked back to the car.

“Ohhhhhhh Shit!!!” Ted laughed drunkenly.

We shined a flashlight on the lid of the trunk and saw three bullet holes. Two inches higher, and one of us would be hit.

“Are those bullet holes?” Debbie put her fingers in them.

“Yes, they are. Get in.”

"They're still warm," she said.

We entered the freeway slowly looking for our pursuers.

Ted collected all manner of weapons, some illegal, in his apartment. I had no idea he kept one in his car. As a National Guardsman, Ted knew how to use a gun, and it was easy to smuggle them through his military contacts.

The next day in the weight room at the Lemans Apartments, Walker Bearden, with his short, blue-black hair and big, brown eyes, bulked up along with the ex- football players and other muscle men. These hard bodies also came to the dance parties, usually with petite blonds on their arms.

Weight lifters shined with sweat, and a sour smell filled the gym. We tried to stay out of the way of the clanging weights hitting the floor, as we watched Walker clean-and-jerk 250 pounds. A student at The University of Georgia with one quarter left to graduate, he never finished. He was good looking, and we all wanted to date him. He played hard to get, until Michelle introduced us to pot. Then he became everybody's boyfriend.

"Would you like some tea?" Michelle looked at me with big, brown eyes.

"No thanks," I said, "not much of a tea drinker."

Walker, Linda, and Debbie left with Michelle in Walker's car.

Tea was the code name for pot, I learned. Soon, all our friends were having tea. We stopped going to the Le Mans dances, but instead went to Piedmont Park to hear the new acid rock sound. The Park, a gathering place for people and events, had two entrances surrounding a large lake. Rock bands played there on hot summer nights.

Hippies threw Frisbees and sold dope during weekends. Sometimes they cooked macrobiotic food and gave it away, "brown rice, seaweed and a dirty hot dog," to quote Bob Dylan in "Three Ships a Sailing." Careful what you eat in Piedmont Park.

I ran into my cousin, Eddie, sitting there under a large tree one summer afternoon. I hardly recognized him with his long hair. I had not seen him, since he was a kid who stuttered.

"Eddie, is that you?"

"Yeah, Judy, but you don't want to be seen with me." He turned the other way.

"Why not?"

“The cops are watching me. I’m selling weed.”

He sat on the grass, legs akimbo, looking around like a scared rabbit.

“Ok, give me a joint, and I’ll be on my way.”

Eddie tossed a joint at my feet. “Jesus, Judy, go away for your own good.”

“Thanks, Eddie. Good luck.” I picked up the joint and walked away. Years later Eddie would do time in the State Penitentiary for drug dealing.

Walker, the body builder from the gym, also got involved in the drug market. He dropped out of school and started growing and selling marijuana. His hair grew long, and he stopped working out. He offered me a ride downtown in his old car.

“Buckle up, Judy, and don’t lean on that door. It won’t stay closed.”

He skidded the old Ford through the intersection with a hard left turn, pushing me against the passenger door with his outstretched hand. It flew open, and I fell over hanging onto the seatbelt for dear life. My head hung below the open door, so I could see the underside of the car and the street spinning beneath me. Pedestrians on the corners of the intersection shouted in horror. Walker held me and pushed me at the same time, laughing. When we made the turn, he pulled me back inside, and the door slammed shut.

“Judy, you're funny. I wouldn’t let you fall.”

I laughed too, because I survived. Walker was still strong, even though he stopped lifting weights, when he started smoking dope.

The next day, the pink princess phone trilled from the living room of my apartment. My roommate, Linda, answered.

It's for you, Judy." She handed me the phone.

"Judy? It's Mother. Could you come home and go with Valerie and Ralph to get married?"

"What?"

"She's pregnant."

"Oh."

My pretty sister, Valerie, pregnant at 17. I thought of her as a little girl with blond hair and green eyes. She suntanned easily. My brother, Wayne, and I, both, looked goofy with our red hair and freckles. Wayne's friend, Jimmy Whitley, carried Valerie everywhere, like a little trophy, when she was little. I chased after them wanting to be carried too, but no way -- only Valerie.

Little boys chased Valerie for a kiss.

"Did you see John kiss Valerie?" John's mother laughed.

"Aren't they cute?" Mother watched.

Years later as a teenager, Valerie got caught making out with Lanny Chastain in the gym after school. Mother saw her in a lip-locked embrace and lectured her about being too easy. I didn't have that problem. No boys wanted to kiss me.

"If a boy is too familiar with you and puts his hand on you, and you don't like it, you say, 'Excuse me,' and remove his hand." Mother pantomimed this action.

"What if we like it?" Valerie gave me a knowing look, as Mother walked away.

"I heard you. It's not funny," Mother said.

Mother tried to prepare us for life as an adult in the world of men, but without birth control, Valerie was not so lucky. Ralph and Valerie had dated all through high school, and now Valerie was pregnant.

I came home the next day and called David, my high school boyfriend, who was happy to accompany me. We drove with Ralph and Valerie to Walhalla, the only place in Georgia to perform underage nuptials.

“Y’all, just get married too,” Mother said, exhausted.

“No thanks,” I said. “We’ll be back.”

The Justice of the Peace quickly dispatched Ralph and Valerie into the sea of matrimony, while David and I witnessed the holy union. As customary, the marriage banns were posted in the local newspaper in Walhalla. Though it was miles away from Monroe, someone saw the posting and reported Valerie to the school board. It could be that since Walhalla was known for this service to the under-aged wedded, someone took it upon themselves to check the postings.

In 1969, in Walton County, Georgia, you could not be married in high school, nor could you have a baby. You could be unwed and pregnant, but once the baby was born, you had to drop out. Mother met with the school board.

“Why can’t she finish school? She’s the smartest one in her class!” Mother demanded.

This was true. Valerie was President of the Latin Club, earning top honors in the classroom, and participating in debate, while I was an average student. We wore the same

clothes, had many of the same friends, and even looked alike in high school. The sibling rivalry grew to range wars, as we competed on every level: sports, popularity, and academics.

No one encouraged me to go to college except my 10th grade history teacher, who wanted me to switch to a college prep curriculum. That meant taking plane geometry with my sister, who was two years younger.

Valerie challenged me to out-score her. It was very difficult. Sometimes I think she deliberately threw a test just to keep peace at home. I also remember she helped me. We fought about everything: clothes, friends, tennis rackets, and whose turn it was to do the dishes, but I was sad, when Valerie was forced to drop out of school. The school board would make no exception.

“Everyone signed a contract at the beginning of the school year stating they could not attend school, if they are married. It's the law,” the school board replied.

“Some kids are more mature than others,” Mother said, weakly.

Valerie hid her pregnancy, as long as she could, in hopes of graduating. At six months it became obvious to Mother. I had been living in Atlanta for a year, when Mother called me. I am sure it was a come-to-Jesus moment for Valerie, when she told Mother she was pregnant, and I am glad I was not there to witness it. I had seen many of those histrionics in my years living at home.

Mother had a come-to-Jesus moment with my dad, trying to convince him to quit drinking. She chugged white lightning until she passed out. My dad thought she was

dying. They both ended up in the floor crying, as he held her in his arms.

“Ivah Ree, you know I love you.”

We three kids stood watching in disbelief, seeing our parents sprawled in the floor. My dad never looked the same to me after that. I felt sorry for him, and he was no longer the big, strong man so powerful in my eyes. Mother reduced him to just a man.

During those same years, when we all lived in that house, Mother had night terrors and woke up everyone, screaming while my dad tried to comfort her. I couldn't wait to move out.

Maybe getting pregnant was Valerie's way to get out that house, but she didn't get far. Mother may have insisted Valerie get married, when she learned Valerie was pregnant. She could have easily waited until after graduation to marry. It was just a couple of months. She should have graduated Valedictorian, but instead, three months later, she gave birth to Ashli.

I drove out of that little town as soon as I bought a car. Valerie stayed. Now I wonder what sent me as far away from there as I could get. I knew there was a different life out there. I had seen it on TV.

“Quiet. The news is on.” Dan said, as he sat on the green vinyl couch.

In the living room we huddled around the large TV encased in a heavy piece of furniture with swinging doors that had circular handles. On the six o'clock news, Walter Cronkite stared back at us from the Sylvania picture tube. The base of the TV housed the large speaker covered by a heavy fabric to transmit the sound. One round knob controlled the on/off switch and the volume. The knob on the opposite side of the cabinet changed the three channels.

On those three channels I saw the world unfold—blacks being beaten and hosed during integration. Dr. Martin Luther King and both Kennedy assassinations played on TV as well as the Cuban Missile Crisis. On Highway 11 we watched the grass grow until my cousin, Ann, and I set fire to it. The driver of an 18-wheeler pulled over to help beat out the flame, before it reached Winder. A few years later, at age 19, I set out to find that flame of unrest burning across the country

3

The Vietnam War

(1969-1972)

In 1970, the draft was in place, and every eighteen-year-old male had a lottery number. If it was high, you might not have to go. My older brother, Wayne's, number was two. After his four-year college deferment, he shipped out. Mother was sad. She and her brothers all served in WWII, as well as Dan and his brothers. She did not want her boy to go to war.

Myopic and slightly built, Wayne's glasses were as thick as coke bottles. I remember dancing with him in high school, swinging him around polka style and lifting him off the floor, because I weighed more. The best student in his class, he earned awards for his brilliance.

He wasn't much of a hunter, though he got a gun for Christmas one year and headed to the woods to kill something. As he walked across the garden, a rabbit ran out and startled him. He jumped back on one foot lifted the gun and fired. He was very sad for the rabbit and never shot another thing, till he shot me in the back with a bb gun. He warned me not to follow him and Jimmy Whitley into the woods.

Years later as a student at Georgia State University, I read *The Great Speckled Bird*, founded by activists from Emory University. The counterculture underground

newspaper advocated the student war protests that spread across the country. Along with The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), who were very active on campus in their quest for equality, economic justice, and peace, my roommate, Michelle, and I attended student sit-ins at Emory University.

I didn't know that much about the war and was amazed by the passion and the knowledge of those kids at Emory-- "The US is on overkill with too much technology against people living in the jungle. Why are we there? We can't police the world. If the Communists want it, let them have it. It's a jungle."

Vietnam was too far away and no threat, except to the young boys who were forced to serve in the unpopular war. To escape the draft, some fled to Canada. My brother was in Cambodia, because he was drafted, and I became a war protester.

Tear gas filled the air at the war protest in Piedmont Park. With the exits blocked off, hippies were arrested. We outnumbered the police and began to overtake their cars, climbing on them and stopping them in their tracks. We rescued a young boy in the backseat by shaking the car till the door flew open. Another paddy wagon came through with the mayor's wife, arrested as war protester. That was the rumor we hippies repeated because we thought it gave us political clout. Mayor Sam Massell ran the city in those days.

Police swarmed Piedmont Park, herding us from one end of the park to the next. The air nauseated me. An Eastern Airlines stewardess in our group panicked looking for a way out. She would lose her job, if she went to jail. We were stranded with no food or

water and the thick smell of mace.

Many hours passed before the raid ended, and the crowd dispersed. None of my friends were arrested that day, and some of them were draft dodgers.

A few years later the office of *The Great Speckled Bird* located at the north end of Piedmont Park was firebombed and destroyed on May 6, 1972, after the paper published an expose' of the mayor of Atlanta.

Another war protester, Walker, who dropped out of school, was always a free thinker. He ran around bare-footed, even in the winter, because he had no money. He sold his blood to pay rent on a large house with six other guys. To avoid the draft, he asked me to break his foot by running over it with his car. He got really drunk and stoned, so he couldn't feel it. When that didn't work, he ran up and down stairs to elevate his blood pressure before his interview with the recruiter. Then he became a draft dodger.

AWOL, Danny Sorrels, a friend from home, was shot in a drug deal in Canada, and his girlfriend, Jan, left Atlanta to bring him home. She had no bread or car, so we all chipped in and bought a pound of grass for her to finance her trip up the coast. She was six months pregnant.

Another famous war protester, Muhammad Ali, made the conscientious objector claim a popular one. He was stripped of his Heavy Weight Championship Belt for two years while he fought the Supreme Court for his right as an Islamist, whose religion prohibited him from going to war. He would have gone to jail for not reporting to duty, but the Court ruled in his favor. When he returned to the ring, his first contest was in

Atlanta, against Jerry Quarry. I saw it on closed circuit. Ali was a folk hero of the hippies.

The war had gone on too long, and the people at home were hostile toward “The Military Industrial Complex.” The Mylai Massacre of villagers, including women and children, perpetrated by Lieutenant William Calle, the near genocide air bombing raids on peasants with small arms, the four dead in Ohio at Kent State University campus where student demonstrators were shot down by the National Guard, finally angered the civilians.

My brother was a medic in Cambodia and came home on leave. He fell asleep on my couch. When I tried to wake him and offer him a bed upstairs, he startled and threw me to the ground. Never wake a soldier from his slumber, you might get hurt. Wayne could sleep standing up. He learned that in Vietnam. He came home shell shocked and jumpy. He didn't want to go out to crowded or unfamiliar places. I know he saw a lot of horror as a medic, but we never talked about the war. He didn't want to. He just wanted to forget. He was never the same after Vietnam. None of us were.

When I think of the four dead at Kent State University, I am angered all over again that the US would gun down their own citizens on a college campus.

We were the flower children, and "We all want to change the world." (Beatles, "Revolution"). Peace, Love, and Rock and Roll was our mantra. Fueled by marijuana and music, we were the Revolutionaries, and like most revolts it started on the college

campus, where intellectuals had time to consider the real problems and effect change.

Our numbers were large, and we were united in one cause, all across the country—"Stop the War."

Soldiers in uniform returning from Vietnam did not get the welcome most soldiers received. The war became increasingly unpopular at home, and in some demonstrations, the soldiers were seen as an enemy to peace and were spit upon by the public. War protests and riots were on every campus. Soon businesses and the general population demanded an end to the military supremacy in Vietnam.

My brother did not wear his uniform, when he came home after two years, but everyone recognized his class-A haircut. He bought gifts for my family. For himself, he bought a reel-to-reel Teac tape system, which was stolen from his apartment immediately. He also brought home some very strong weed.

Drugs were plentiful in Vietnam. Some of the marijuana servicemen brought back was so heavy the paranoia it produced was frightening. I smoked some once and stayed up all night thinking I was going to die. None of my friends could comfort me. It could have been laced with something. We didn't always know what we were smoking.

With the drug culture came great music. In Piedmont Park we listened to The Allman Brothers Band. They had just played the Fillmore East, and with two drummers, Southern Rock was born.

Some of the best music of the day were war protest songs. Country Joe and the Fish wrote "Vietnam".

‘And it’s one, two, three,
What are we fighting for?
Don’t ask me, I don’t give a damn
The next stop is Vietnam.
And it’s five, six, seven,
Open up the pearly gates
Well there ain’t no time to wonder why
Whoppee we’re all gonna die.’
Be the first one on your block to have your boy come home in a box.

Crosby Steels, and Nash wrote "Four Dead in Ohio"

‘Tin Soldiers and Nixon coming
We’re finally on our own
This summer I hear the drumming
4 dead in Ohio
Got to get down to it
Soldiers are cutting us down
Should have been done long ago
What if you knew her and found her dead on the ground
How can you run when you know?’

In 1970 Piedmont Park staged music and was also a hang -out for religious fanatics and Hippies throwing Frisbees.

“Do you know Jesus?” a long hair asked.

“Yeah, I heard of him.” I walked away, not wanting to be saved.

What a creep.

My roommates and I had our Frisbees and hung out there too. By this time I was living with 4 girls in a 2 bedroom apartment. Camille moved in, and she was beautiful, with bee stung lips, clear blue eyes, and honey colored hair that cascaded into soft thick curls at her shoulders. Her skin was flawless with the palest rosy blush on her cheeks. She suntanned easily. What a backdrop for those lips and eyes. If Helen’s was the face that launched a thousand ships, then she looked like Camille. Her boyfriend was Josh, but he would not last long once she met Matt Roscoe, wealthy son of a famous Atlanta lawyer.

Matt was short and stocky, but well dressed. He owned many cars. He also had a Harley that he ripped up and down the streets of West Paces. He rode his bike one afternoon with a roll of cash in his hip pocket for a drug deal. The road was under construction, and he bounced through a pothole. The cash came floating out into the air. Workers on the street scrambled to collect the money. He realized hundreds of dollars of his money was being picked up by the road crew, and he kept going. That is the image I have of Matt Roscoe. Money is flying out his ass, and he doesn’t look back.

My yellow MG, now a little faded from a wreck, we would race through the

winding streets of Chastain Park along with Matt's Harley. We took turns with different couples, first in the MG, then on the bike following each other.

We loaded into Matt's van to go to concerts. Mattresses, pallets, and psychedelic posters took the place of the back seat. The stereo blasted "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," "Guinevere, and "White Bird." We saw Black Sabbath in Chastain Park, and The Rolling Stones at Auburn University with Chuck Berry as the opening act. At the Birdcage downtown, Percy Sledge played. It was an all- black night club, but they let the long hairs in. We were getting hosed and maced like they once were, so there was an unspoken bond. Janis Joplin played Georgia Tech, Iron Butterfly and Steppenwolf played the Fox. Matt bought tickets and opened a side door of the Civic Center for the rest of us to see Jose Feliciano and Santana.

The pop festivals were a great gathering of like-minded people. We found our inspiration in music, and the music found its inspiration in us. It was a love fest. Sometimes, we had to take off our clothes to fully absorb it. The Atlanta Pop Festival of 1969 had 200,000 people in attendance. A friend bought a ticket for me. He hoped I was his date, but I took the ticket and got into Debbie's car. He wasn't my type.

The traffic snaked to the event. People hung onto the backs of convertibles, trucks, and car bumpers. Some walked, as we got closer. We had no idea what to expect. The car was immediately blocked in. At the staging area, throngs of people crowded around, and in fact, the gate surrounding the event was torn down by the mob.

My brother passed out on a blanket. This was the summer before he left for Vietnam. I stayed with him till he aroused. He was very drunk and might get stepped on. I had no money, food, or water, though there were vendors around. The music was constant, with lesser acts during the day, and headliners at night. By the time Jimmy Hendrix came on, it was 4:00 am. Janis Joplin, Allman Brothers, Chicago, Jefferson Airplane, Black Sabbath, Heat and a host of other greats played in those three days.

It was dusty and hot. We found Wallace Bell, a friend from back home. He had a campsite with sleeping bags, food, water, a grill, and even a tooth brush, which I used. Thank God, we found Wallace, or we would have died from hunger.

The next day, fire trucks appeared and hosed everyone down, just to cool us. Water was free.

Debbie smashed a few fenders, trying to move her car before giving up. People passed out in make shift Red Cross tents--some overdosed. We got naked in the fire hoses. The mud left behind was a sliding pit. People had sex and didn't care who watched.

“Hey man, we’re driving up to Woodstock next month, want to go?” my friend, John, asked.

“No thanks,” I said.

I was sure I would perish.

Back at the apartment the next night after the festival, I took a shower for the first time in four days.

“Is the coast clear?”

“Hold on. Ok, coast is clear,” Debbie said.

I ran out of the shower into the bedroom I shared with Debbie. I had a towel around me, but my hair was dripping wet. I closed the door and took off the towel to dry my hair. I bent over, so my hair fell forward and wrapped it in the towel then turned around. All the guys were sitting on the two beds they had hidden behind.

“Ahhhhhhh!” I scrambled to cover myself and ran back to the bathroom.

“Jesus, Debbie, I thought you got the guys out.”

Faber, Brake, Matt, and Walker strolled down the stairs laughing. “Don’t be mad, Judy. You have a great figure.”

I reentered the room. “Why did you do that, Debbie?”

“They wanted to. I thought it was funny.”

“Great, thanks a lot. What are we doing tonight, anyway?”

“Some of the guys are going to John’s to jam. We can go with them, if you want. Come down, when you get dressed. Your cousin is here.”

“My cousin?”

“Yeah, Jimmy.”

“Oh shit, I’ll be right down.”

“Good. He looks like he might kill somebody.”

I thought back to my childhood days with Jimmy.

We played outside in our big front yard that was dirt, except for the large roots

sprouting from a giant oak tree. Swept with a brush broom, the yard had a pattern of strokes. A piece of cotton stuck in the hole of the screen door kept the flies out of the house. A large stone replaced one of the broken steps. Many pictures of us kids were snapped there like a scene from "The Grapes of Wrath."

On summer nights, Mother and Dan sat on the front porch drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon beer with salt poured around the top. Imitating them, we poured salt in our coke cans and watched it foam. My dad smoked Camel cigarettes and flipped the butts into the front yard, where we played. Stepping on them with our bare feet, we got burned, but no one cared-- a hazard of being, "one o' them Cokers," my maiden name.

A well to the left of the house had a wooden shed built over it with benches, where my cousin, Jimmy, and I played doctor. I lay on my stomach, and Jimmy took down my shorts exposing my behind. He put his head on my bottom to listen, and I felt his warm breath on my buttocks. His short crew cut hair was warm and fuzzy, as he rubbed it on my backside. It felt good.

"Judy, you need to come inside. Jimmy, it's time for you to go home," Mother yelled out the kitchen window.

"Yes ma'am." Jimmy jumped on his bike.

I picked up my pants and came inside. "Why does he have to go?" I asked.

"It is time for him to go home, and you need to keep your pants up."

I hurried downstairs to see Jimmy sitting on the couch, frowning.

“Jimmy, hey, how you doing?”

“Who are these hippies?” he asked loudly

“They’re friends.”

“Friends? Keep ‘em away from me, or I’ll have to knock one out.” He looked sidelong at Faber.

“Hey man, let’s go over to John’s,” Faber said, getting the hint.

“Good riddance,” Jimmy shouted.

“God, settle down. What is your problem?” I asked.

“I don’t have one, but you do, if these are your friends. I was supposed to meet Wayne here. He said there was a party.”

About that time, Wayne walked in.

“Hey man, what’s going on?”

“Nothing, where you been?” Jimmy asked.

“I stopped for some food. I was starving. Where is everybody?”

“I just ran off a bunch of long hairs, if that’s who you mean. I ain’t hanging out with no low lifes,” Jimmy barked.

“Ok, let’s make a drink,” Wayne suggested.

Wayne and Jimmy mixed drinks in the kitchen.

“Nice guy,” Debbie noticed.

“Yeah, he’s pretty straight,” I admitted.

Jimmy Harris was Uncle Perry Hugh's son, and like Perry Hugh, he had a mean streak in him. Skinny as a rail, and mean as a snake, Perry Hugh had a snort of whiskey, and he cussed a lot. Not really mean, he just seemed that way because of all the cussing.

“Get the hell out, and shut the hell up, you little idiots,” he said to all us cousins, who ransacked his house. It never sounded that harsh, because he cupped his lips around the cuss words, so they sounded comedic. Funny, but we knew he wasn't kidding.

Jimmy was a former football player, and off the charts smart. He could have attended any school in the country including MIT, but he was a country boy who graduated from Georgia Tech. Jimmy's face was a permanent frown, much like Perry Hugh's. He looked as if he couldn't believe all the shit that was going on around him. If someone needed to be straightened out, he was the man to do it. He would take you down.

Jimmy comes from a long line of Harrises. The Harris Homestead dates back to George Washington who granted land to settlers to build the country. My mother's great, great, Grandpa William Harris, built the homestead on 500 acres in Monroe. It is on the national registry of historic places, and listed in the heritage foundation. Harris is my mother's maiden name.

The Harris House is a restored farmhouse, with a smoke house, a carriage house, and a spring house on the stream behind it for cold storage of food back in the day. It is open to the public on weekends, much like the Atlanta History Museum's farm house, but when the Harrises have their family reunion, it's all ours.

One year we had continental soldiers firing off muskets, reenactments of the civil war, and the DAR in attendance. At the graveyard on the property, there was a ceremony to return some soil from a descendant's grave to the Harris House. All the cousins scooped some soil onto the grave of that Continental soldier. Eliza Jane is buried there too. Perhaps the song "Little Liza Jane" was written about her. It was a popular name at the turn of the century.

There were some Cokers, my dad's family, buried there also. The Cokers and Harrises were joined some generations before Mother and Dan, but the Harris name endures. The Coker name died off with my brother, Wayne, and cousin, Steve, who had no children. Jimmy Harris had three boys, and his boys had three more. The name would go on, probably because of that mean streak. If there was a fight, whoever had the most Harris in them would win.

That country lifestyle was in my rearview mirror now, as I embraced the city and the people who wanted to make a change in the world.

6**The Friendly Skies**

(1973-1983)

In 1973, Bob and I moved to California for 20 years. My visits back home were few. During those years Valerie earned her GED, and her son, Simon, was born three years later. She stayed home with the children, while her husband, Ralph, finished school at the University of Georgia. They lived in a tiny apartment in Athens and struggled with the expense of a young family.

Valerie went back to school, and worked in a library. Then finished college while changing diapers at home. She graduated at the top of her class with a Master's Degree in Journalism from the University of Georgia. She also taught there.

I lived out of a suitcase as a flight attendant with United Airlines for 10 years. Bob traveled every week in his new job as operations manager in the family childcare business. We didn't see each other very often.

We lived in the Park Newport Apartments in Newport Beach. The gym voted us fitness- couple of the month. They wrote a nice article about us, along with our picture in the newsletter. The photographer asked me to model for the new brochure: wrapped in a towel in the sauna for one shot, wearing a leotard and riding a stationary bike in the second photo, and dressed for tennis with the pro on the back cover. Convinced I should

model, I built a portfolio of pictures and auditioned for print work with very little success.

“Well at least you have some beautiful pictures to enjoy,” Bob’s mother said.

Today, every time I look at that portfolio, I smile remembering Betty’s words. In an interview with Nina Blanchard, famous modeling agent in LA, she thumbed through my book and read my resume. “You’re a flight attendant? Where do you fly?”

“Honolulu,” I said.

“Why do you want to do this? You already have a great job.”

“I need to do more. On the airplane I watch life go by. People get off the airplane and go somewhere. I turn around and fly home,” I said. She studied me for a second then pushed my book of pictures back to me.

“These are pictures of an actress. You need to take acting lessons. You can do it all your life. You’re already too old to model. You’ll meet people from the industry on your flights. Introduce yourself. Good luck.”

I was 28. I took her advice and enrolled in the extension program at the University of California, Irvine. I studied Drama. I flew all-nighters to make a nine am class. Some days I didn’t know if I was coming or going except to look at the sign on the 405 freeway. If it said, “South,” I was going home. Ten years older than most students, I was

closer to the age of my professors. I saw Jon Lovett, a grad student, dressed as an old lady in a wheel chair for a scene. He cracked up everyone.

I did a lot of stage, one student film at USC, and I went on auditions listed in the Drama Logue, an actor's guide for work in L.A.

A pretty blond raced past me down the well- manicured sidewalk away from a small bungalow in Hollywood.

"Don't go in there," she said.

"What?"

I watched her go. *Was she talking to me?* I knocked on the door. A handsome man answered.

"Hi, I'm Judy. I'm here for the audition."

"Yes, come on in." He opened the door.

"How are you doing today?"

"Great," I said.

"Well, let me tell you a little about the film we're shooting. You'll play a woman who's getting older and losing her looks. She's depressed, looking at herself in the mirror. Come in the bathroom. Let's see what you can do."

I frowned into the mirror, and brushed my hair forward. I squinted and pulled my face back with my hands, turning side to side. I gave a little sigh and shot the mirror a bird.

“Good. Come back into the living room. We need to talk about a few other things.”

He sat down next to me on the couch.

“There’s nudity in this film. Do you object to taking off your clothes?”

“No.”

“Ok. Take off your blouse. I just need to see how you look.”

I took off my blouse.

“Beautiful. I need to see your breasts. Would you mind taking off your bra?”

I took off my bra and sat there topless. When I looked at his lap, he had a bulging hard on and smiled perversely. I grabbed my shirt and hoped I could get out of there. I made it to the door with my blouse on and bra in hand.

“I don’t think I want to do this film,” I said.

I ran out the front door, where I saw a girl coming up the walk to the house.

“Don’t go in there,” I warned.

“What?” she said.

On the day of my graduation from UCI with a degree in Drama, my cap and gown

were neatly ironed and packed. I wore my class ring, even though it was too small. I had ten days off from work that month, and Bob and I were flying to Singapore to celebrate. Breakfast was ready, when Bob bounded down the stairs and headed for the door.

“Where’re are you going?” I asked.

“I’m going to Fashion Island.”

“But food is ready.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“What? Wait for me. I’ll come with you.”

“No, I’m going by myself.”

“Why? I thought we could spend the day together. Let’s eat breakfast and go together.”

“No, I’ll see you later.” He left.

I threw the food in the sink.

“Fine. I’m leaving too.”

He did that. He would often disappear and come back late. Gone all morning at the gym or running errands, he showed up for our two- hour drive to Big Bear Mountain for a day of skiing. The lifts closed after my first run. I was furious. He was unfazed.

I bought tickets to The Magic Castle in LA for dinner and shows. He knew I wanted to be there at seven, but he came home at seven, and we got to The Magic Castle at nine missed dinner and saw one show. Ok for him.

Paul McCartney and Wings tickets sat on my desk for weeks.

"I'll be out of town. Take someone else," he said.

I took my dentist friend, Greg, who buzzed my intercom and asked me to come down to the car.

"Come on up for a drink first," I said.

"There's no parking for my car. I don't want to get it scratched."

"What?"

"It's a Porsche. I need two spaces."

I went down, and he drove us to LA to see the show. Pregnant Cher escorted by Elton John walked past and sat in the second row. In the car on our way home, Greg put his hand on my knee, to see if I was interested. I missed Bob. He should have been there. He would have loved the show.

Unavailable. That was Bob. If I planned something, and he wasn't interested, he found a way out. I spent a lot of time waiting around for him. Not today.

I threw a few things into a bag and snapped out the door in my high heeled mules,

speeding down the 405 freeway to LA in my 240 Z.

I made that forty- five- minute drive from our home in Newport Beach to the airport and parked in the crew parking lot like any other day at work. I changed my Singapore pass and boarded the next flight to Atlanta. In first class, I told a flight attendant about my graduation from UCI.

“I had a fight with my husband, and I’m not going,” I said.

“You need to go home,” she said.

“No, I’m leaving. Fuck it.”

“I think you’ll regret this,” she said.

As we took off, the pilot made his announcement. “It’s a beautiful day in southern California, below we’re just flying over UCI. Looks like a great day for a graduation.”

I looked out the window and swallowed hard.

Too late now, I'm going home to Mother.

In Atlanta, I called Ted, whom I had dated before Bob. The two men met while serving in the army reserves, and realized they were dating the same woman. I stopped seeing Ted, but he remained our friend.

“Hey, I’m in town are you home?”

“Yeah, come on over,” he said.

“OK, you got any dope?”

“Yeah, come on.”

We snorted cocaine all evening with his friends.

“Where’s Bob?” Ted asked.

"I left him."

“Oh shit! Well here take a hit of this.”

We stayed up most of the night talking and laughing, till I forgot I was mad.

Ted walked me upstairs.

"Here’s your room. Take this. It’ll help you sleep." He handed me a large pill.

"What is it?"

"Quaalude."

I didn’t care what it was, and I slept.

The next morning, stone sober, I began to regret my decision. Ted had already left for work. I looked into his kitchen for a cup of coffee. The dated kitchen, typical of a bachelor pad, reminded me of the days in Atlanta, before Bob and I moved to Newport Beach. This was my old life. Why was I revisiting it? It looked beat up and stale compared to my sparkling new life in California. Even the Krispy Kreme donut was stale.

I threw it into the sink and walked out to my rental car.

When I got to Mother's an hour later, I wondered what the hell I was doing there. The house looked old and smaller than I remembered. The front door was locked because they were not expecting me. I wanted to leave, but there was no turning back now. I was a long way from home. I saw Mother peek out the window at the strange car in her yard. Her eyes met mine, as I stood on the front porch. She was surprised to see me and smiled, as she opened the door.

"Judy, what are you doing home? What's going on?" Her eyes darted to my suitcase.

Dan poked his head around the corner and laughed, "Judy, come on in."

Upon closer inspection, "What's wrong? Where's Bob?"

"He's back in LA. I got mad and left. He doesn't care about anyone but himself. Yesterday was my graduation, and he just took off without me, after we planned the day. I don't want to talk to him if he calls." I plopped down in a chair to examine my surroundings. A floral couch replaced the old green vinyl couch that the family sat on in front of the TV because there was nothing else to do in this little town. The pine paneled walls began to close in on me.

"Maybe you should give him a chance to explain," Mother suggested.

"No, I'm done with him," I said, not believing the words that came out of my

mouth.

"So, you missed your graduation?"

"Yes, I left."

"Judy, you only punished yourself by leaving."

"I know."

"Why did you do that?"

"It just didn't seem important anymore," I said.

"I'm sorry you did that."

"Yeah, me too."

It's what I did. I ran away and hoped he missed me. It was easy to jump on an airplane and get lost. It didn't solve anything, but pushed the problem away.

"Let's get out of here," Mother said suddenly. "Judy's home. Let's go to the mountains and have a little vacation."

"Mother, you don't have to take me anywhere. I won't be any better there."

"Well, I want to go, so get ready we're leaving," she said.

On the drive to the mountains, I held back tears. Why was I in Georgia with my parents, instead of Singapore with my husband? I slipped off my wedding ring and held it

out the open window. *If I let it go would that make me feel better?* I put it back on.

We moved into a rustic cabin on a river. The scenery was nice, so it felt a little like a vacation-- a very sad vacation. Mother pattered around enjoying the change of view, unpacking like nothing was wrong. Deep furrows lined Dan's face.

"Ok, let's take a hike. I know a great trail," Mother said.

I couldn't believe Mother knew a trail. Had she been here before? Maybe the exercise would cheer me.

We plodded along in the deep woods for an hour in silence.

"What was that?" Mother looked back for Dan, who was far behind us slowed by his heart condition. Suddenly, she freaked out and shouted, "Dan!" just as two guys passed us. She startled me.

"Why did you yell for Dan?"

"I didn't want those men to think we were alone."

"They didn't even notice us, till you shouted. You scared them," I said.

We laughed. My spell was broken. Maybe I would be ok.

At least being home with my parents distracted me from my problems. I was able to forget Bob for a while and realize how old my parents were getting. They could not solve my problems anymore, only I could.

Back at Mother's house the next day, Bob called.

"Judy, what are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm so mad at you."

"Well, I'm sorry. My whole family went to your graduation, Mom, Dad, Jerry, Sandra and their kids. We were all there. Where were you?" he laughed.

"I hate you."

"I didn't know where you were. I went there looking for you. We saw a play last night with Jerry Mathers in it. Really cool."

"I don't care what you did last night."

"Try to relax, and come back home tomorrow."

"I don't know if I want to see you again."

"Look, everybody loves you. I miss you. Come home."

I hung up.

"Is everything Ok?" Dan asked.

"No, I don't want to see him."

"Oh," Dan walked back to the couch and turned on the TV.

In bed that night, I burrowed under the covers and slept like a rock.

Bob called the next morning.

“Judy, you need to come home. I love you.”

“You just want me to come home, so you can go to Singapore.”

“We can still do that.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere with you.” I hung up.

Dan peeked into my room.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Do you want me to call Bob?” Dan stood at the foot of my bed.

“No. There's nothing you can do.”

“I hate to see you this way. Maybe you should give him another chance. He's a good man.”

I felt sorry for Dan. I had interrupted his little world, bad mouthing my husband.

Mother busied herself cooking and chattering about nothing important, then she looked at me with those steely blue, no bullshit eyes.

“You can’t stay here, you need to go back and sort things out.”

"I know."

"Take your time." She walked out to the garden.

I sat there alone. I didn't feel important to Bob. He was very close to his mother, and he wanted to spend every weekend with his parents. His mother planned our anniversary every year because it coincided with the twin nephew's birthdays, so it was a troop movement with his family for every event. His mother took over our social calendar. I fought it, but she usually won. She was a very experienced matriarch. That was our problem for years. Bob deferred to his mother instead of me. Looking back today that seems childish, but I was a child of 30.

The next day, I flew back to Los Angeles. I walked into my house a stranger.

"Judy, thank god you're home." Bob hugged me, laughing. "I'm so glad you're home. See, here's all your graduation cards." He led me to a counter to see the cards displayed. I opened the graduation cards and read them.

"Congratulations on your graduation. I just have one question. Why?"

Bob's family teased me wondering why after three schools and ten years, I wanted to finish. Jerry, Bob's brother, was a stockbroker. Sandra, his wife, was a school teacher. Bob's father, Hal, was a social worker, and Betty, Bob's mother, was a volunteer fundraiser. A degree in Drama seemed useless to them, even though I appeared on stage, TV shows, and a movie. I also had a night club act at the Velvet Turtle in Long Beach.

We spent every weekend with Bob's large family. I felt suffocated.

When Bob and I fought about something, one of us would run away. We never talked out the issues, but instead one of us would storm off. I did this time. We always came back and eventually talked about the problem, but first we had to put distance between us. We were both stubborn, independent people who wanted things done our way.

Bob left me on a ski trip once and flew home alone. I came home two days later. We had been skiing together, and I was a little better skier than him. He was getting tired trying to keep up and wanted to rest for a minute.

“We can rest on the chair. Come on,” I chided and skied off.

When we got to the chair, I skied up, and he came beside me, but he wasn't ready when the chair scooped us up, and he almost fell off. When he got off the chair, he was mad. He skied down the mountain turned in his equipment and flew home, leaving me stranded with no car at the airport.

We ran away from each other. It was how we related.

The next week I discovered my pregnancy.

“Judy ran away from home because her hormones went crazy. That explains it,” Sandra said.

My mood changed. It had to.

I had stopped taking birth control pills, drinking, and doing drugs for months. I

wanted a baby.

For the last seven years, Los Angeles to Honolulu was my route. The flight would board soon, so I ran out to the gate to call Mother from a pay phone and give her the good news.

“Mother, I’m pregnant.”

“Well, are you go’ng have an abortion?”

“What? Why would you say that?”

“Well, when you were home, I thought you would divorce.”

“Jesus, mother, I’m having the baby. I’ve got to go catch my flight. See you later.”

“Well, congratulations. I guess,” she said.

I hung up the phone and remembered, I did cocaine and a Quaalude at Ted’s.

"Damn!"

On my next visit to the obstetrician, I told him about the drugs I did, before I knew I was pregnant.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll do more harm to the baby worrying than the drugs will. Just don’t do it again, and everything will be fine,” Dr. Jones said.

I took a maternity leave from work and grew larger each day. I went shopping for baby furniture at Fed Co, a discount warehouse on Harbor Blvd in Costa Mesa. The store

carried everything a person could need to run a household. I picked up a car seat, a high chair, and a stroller.

When I put them in my shopping cart, the baby suddenly shifted its weight down cutting off the circulation in my legs. I couldn't walk and folded into a sitting position on a lower empty shelf of the display unit. Dizzy and nauseated, I sat there with my knees up, and my head in my hand. A young couple took heavy items off the shelf above my head, ignoring my obvious distress. I couldn't move, even if they dropped something on my head. I sat there silently cursing.

"Mother fuckers!"

After some time passed, a kind lady came over, "Do you need some help?" she asked.

"I just need to rest a few minutes. The baby moved down, and I can't walk right now."

"I'm a nurse. Do you want me to call an ambulance?" she asked.

"No, I'm ok."

I stood slowly, and she walked me to a chair and got water for me. I sat there for a few more minutes until my circulation returned to normal. This had happened before, debilitating me for about ten minutes.

"You need to go home. Forget about shopping. Just go home, if you think you can

drive," she advised.

"I'm going to check out."

I pushed my cart to the long check- out line. The nurse was really mad now that I was standing in line after almost having a baby in the store. She kept giving me dirty looks and shaking her head. I made it home.

Those episodes were scary at first, but I was getting used to them. The baby was moving into the birth canal.

On March 2, 1981, Bob and I checked into a beautiful ocean view birthing- room at Hoag Hospital high atop the cliffs overlooking Newport Beach. The baby's head lodged against my lower spine--back labor.

"Rub my back hard, Bob."

"I feel the baby's head in your back. I'm afraid to push too hard."

"Just push anyway."

Before Shayne was born, Bob rubbed my back for six hours until his back ached from bending over me.

I enjoyed staying home and being a mom. Shayne slept through the night sat quietly in her stroller and hardly fussed about anything. That same year, Valerie was a

freelance writer and came to LA to help me with baby Shayne. She was happy to see me start a family, sixteen years later than she started hers.

I met other new moms at play groups in the park. I loved having a job and not working, but after eighteen months my leave expired. I needed to hire a nanny. I must have talked to 100 people.

“Are you going to interview the entire Spanish population of Santa Ana?” Bob asked.

“I can’t find anybody I can trust.”

“There must be someone,” he said.

“No. Either they don’t speak English, or they’re too old. I’m not sure I can do this. I don’t want to leave Shayne. You’re traveling. I’m traveling. Somebody needs to stay home with the baby.”

"Up to you, Judy," Bob said.

I met with my supervisor to discuss my options.

“Can I extend my leave again?” I asked

“No, Judy. We need all our staff for the season, but if you come back to work for a few months, maybe you can take a personal leave, or maybe we can buy out your contract,” he said.

“A few months?” I asked my supervisor.

“Yes, and you would have to go back to Chicago for two weeks to retrain,” He scribbled on a pad.

Seriously torn, I loved my job, but I loved my baby more.

In 1983, Reaganomics changed the airline industry with deregulation. Government subsidies were gone, and so were the empty seats. Airlines had to compete and cut labor costs. Some went out of business, others merged, and flights became very crowded. United offered lump sum figures to flight attendants to quit, so they could pay B scale workers to do the same job.

"I'm thinking of quitting, but I'm afraid to make that decision." The words came slowly.

My supervisor looked surprised. "I'll give you two weeks to decide. Talk to the psychologist at the health center. Maybe he can help you." He handed me the phone number.

I had talked to the psychologist-- when my brother died suddenly five years ago. He advised me to take a break from work and go sit on the beach for a while. Not sure he would be of much help this time, I went anyway.

I wasn't ready to make a decision. I wanted to keep my job on the sideline in case I needed a parachute. Running away is what I did, when Bob and I had a fight. I was

about to cut off my exit. One foot out the door was a way of life for me.

I drove into the crew parking lot up to the grey, stark building with no windows. I slunk into the psychologist's stuffy office and sat across from him. He smiled and listened, as I explained my problem.

"I don't think I can leave my baby at home with a stranger, but I'm afraid to quit my job. I've been there ten years. I fly to Hawaii every week. I have seniority, free travel, insurance, and retirement. How can I walk away?"

"Answer two questions," he said.

"Do you have to work?"

"Well, no."

"Is your marriage secure?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, then your answer should be obvious."

I quit my job, but it was a huge loss. No more free passes and extra income.

God, what was I doing, making myself completely dependent on Bob for everything?

The psychologist should have asked the third question: "Did you know that you can make thirty thousand dollars cash by selling your contract, and have free passes for the rest of your life, if you just go back to work for two months?"

That's exactly what happened to many flight attendants in my position.

Still, I was much happier, once I made my decision. I had always taken care of myself with my own money, and I drove any car I wanted to. With Bob controlling the purse strings, life would be very different.

"It's not worth it," was one of his favorite lines. Our arguments over money started then. I was still free willed but with a budget and a baby that depended on me for everything. Bob travelled every week, but I was ready to stay home and be a mom.

For my last job as an actress in LA, I taped an episode of 'Archie's Place' at CBS Studios in Hollywood. I had a small scene with Carroll O'Connor, the star of the series.

I had listed with Central Casting, and CBS called me for the show, where I got paid union wages.

"Mr. O'Connor, I've always admired your work," I said, when I saw an opening.

Carroll O'Connor shook my hand warmly.

"What are you doing?" the director came running over. "You don't talk to the star. You're supposed to be a professional. If everyone ogled the star we wouldn't get anything done."

The director came back later and apologized for being so gruff, but CBS never called me back to work.

At that time Shayne was eighteen months old. I had to leave the house at the crack of dawn to get through traffic for an 8am check in. I stopped at a restaurant just off the freeway for a quick breakfast. As I stood in line to pay my bill, the man behind me asked what I was doing in that neighborhood. I told him I was on my way to CBS. He said, "You should not be in this part of town alone. This is a rough area."

I don't think I was in Watts, but somewhere similar, maybe Compton. I wondered why the line at the cash register was taking so long. It was 6:30 am and I needed to get on the road.

Stumbling to stand at the front of the line was a scantily clad, black hooker wearing a blond wig. I saw her red lips counting out the coins that dropped on the floor as she swayed. The man behind me said, "Careful walking back to your car. Be ready to duck and cover."

I quickly walked back to my car remembering a similar warning from a well-meaning man in NY, when I went out alone on a layover. "You shouldn't be alone on this street at this hour of night. You might get mugged. That was in the '70s before Mayor Giuliani cleaned up the streets. I turned and went back to my hotel.

After a long day on the set and the long drive home in traffic, my baby sitter made more money than I did. I would have to put acting on hold for a few years.

A few months later I visited my parents with little Shayne. We flew back to Georgia in coach this time, because now I had to pay for my flight. I went out with some of my high school friends to plan our class reunion.

"Are you crazy? Why did you quit your job? Susan, the class president, took a sip of her wine.

"I didn't want to leave my baby," I reasoned.

"I'd leave the kid. No way I'd quit that job." She took another sip.

"Tell me about the 'Archie Bunker' episode you did." She snacked on popcorn.

"It takes place in a bar. I haven't seen it yet." I sipped a gin tonic.

"A bar? That's coming on tomorrow night. I saw the previews," Susan banged her wine glass with authority.

"I gotta go." I finished my drink.

I called Bob, when I got home.

"I'm taking an earlier flight. My scene with Carroll O'Conner is coming on tomorrow night, and I don't want to miss it. Can you pick us up in LA?"

"No, I can't," he said, "I'm working."

"Jesus, I have to hail a cab with a baby, a stroller, a car-seat, and two suitcases?"

This is the guy I have to completely rely on now?

"Damn! What have I done?"

"SKYCAP!" I shouted at baggage claim in LA.

10**Mother**

(1998-2003)

“They arrested Paula last night,” Mother said.

Paula was Mother’s caregiver, a petite, single mom with short, curly, blond hair, and bad teeth.

“Where was she?” I asked

“She was using a pay phone in town. She was walking. You know her ol’ car don’t work.”

“Yeah, well I’m glad, I guess. I feel sorry for her,” I said.

“Me too. I feel bad about the whole thing. It’s Mother’s Day too. I feel bad for that little boy. I don’t know who will take care of him.”

“Maybe her mother will,” I said.

“Maybe. They don’t get along, you know. Anyway, she’s in jail.”

I groaned.

“She done me wrong,” Mother said.

“I know. I still feel sorry for her. Her life is crap, and now we throw her in jail.”

“What else could we do?”

I tried to think of something comforting to say.

“Well, I got to go lay down,” Mother said.

Paula used Mother’s checking account to buy groceries. Pam, the part time caregiver, suspected Paula was stealing from us, but she kept quiet. She didn’t want to get involved. The bank teller also noticed the theft but didn’t call Valerie or me. The

confession came, when we closed the account \$15,000 later. "I knew she was stealing money from Miss Ivah Ree,"

It was easy enough to steal from an old lady whose children came in once a week to check on her.

For twenty years my visits to Georgia were infrequent. I had lived out of a suitcase for ten years as a flight attendant for United Airlines in Los Angeles. Bob was a west coast region manager of a child care company. We both travelled. After I quit my job, I had three children in seven years. My parents came out to California to vacation. Valerie came to stay with me, when my first baby was born. I went home to the funeral of my brother and my father. With the whole country between us, I felt disconnected.

When Bob took a job in Atlanta, it was like a homecoming. We had met and married there. I wanted Mother to get to know her grandchildren who were 7, 11, and 14. Mother was still in good shape back then, just a little slow and distracted.

I pulled into the driveway of Mother's brick house with a car port. I walked up the steps and peeked into the three small windows on the door to see Mother dressed in a tailored, blue pantsuit. She sat on her couch with her walker beside her. The shades were pulled low to keep the sun out of the pine paneled living room in the house where she had lived for fifty years. It would take her a few minutes to get up and bump to the door on her walker. She always kept the door locked, since her house got egged at night on more than one occasion.

She installed a motion light and called the sheriff, who said he would look out for her. Those days, when I would spend the night, I was more afraid of the dark than she was. Out in the country it is pitch black at night-- no street lights.

I took Mother to Charlie's in Campton that day. It was just down Highway 11 from

Mother's house. They specialized in a meat and three vegetables for lunch. It was an old house converted into a restaurant. There were Calico curtains on the windows. The vinyl floors were mopped to a shine. We sat at a table that belonged in the '50s with its worn, wood top and the ladder back chairs with cane seats. She kept looking at her watch. Every ten minutes, she commented on the time, as if she needed to be somewhere.

"Why are you watching the clock?" I asked.

"I just want to know what time it is." Mother had the attention span of a grasshopper.

"Did you come from the cotton fields?" she asked the waitress.

"Yes, I did." The waitress probably knew Mother.

"Yeah, me too. After that I prayed to God that I wouldn't marry a farmer, but today I'm the biggest farmer with my two grape vines." The waitress laughed.

Mother's conversations came out of nowhere sometimes. This was her way of making small talk that only the waitress understood. Mother lived alone and maybe any interaction with someone, even a waitress, gave her an outlet.

A few months later Mother had a heart attack and stayed in the hospital for rehabilitation. We knew she needed help and arranged for caregivers to come during the day. It was one of the first major blowouts Valerie and I had, since I moved back to Georgia.

Mother lay in her bed in the rehab section of the hospital. Valerie and I stood looking out the window of the ground floor room discussing how to arrange Mother's house, so it would be safe for her to get around: like removing all the tripping throw rugs and building a hand rail to the stoop at the front and back door.

"We need to hire someone to stay with her and take care of her during the day. I

think she will be okay at night. Maybe the hospital has caregivers who could work for Mother at home,” I said.

“They don’t. I already asked.” Valerie assured me.

A large, black nurse wearing a starched, white uniform came in to check Mother’s vitals.

“How is she doing? I asked.

“Oh, she’s ready to go home.” The nurse smiled large white teeth.

“Is there a network of caregivers we could call to come to Mother’s house during the day?” *Maybe this girl would like to earn some extra money.*

“I told you there wasn’t one,” Valerie barked.

“Check with social services.” The nurse nodded, as she ducked out the door.

“You told me? You told me? How dare you speak to me that way in public?” I was embarrassed.

“All right, settle down.” Mother tried to defuse the situation.

“No. She can’t get away with this. What is your problem? And there is a network of help.”

Valerie stood there staring at me. I fumed. She didn’t want me taking over the situation, but I did.

After Mother came home from the hospital, a caregiver came in three days a week to drive her to the grocery store and doctor’s office; otherwise she stayed alone at night. I made the 80- mile trip once a week and tried to call her every day. I looked forward to those phone calls, accompanied with a glass of wine, in the evening as I sat on my dock overlooking the Etowah River. Valerie lived down the street in the same town and visited more often. If Mother needed something, she called Valerie.

On a hot summer night at almost sunset, I called Mother.

“Hey, it’s me.” I held a glass of wine.

“Wait a minute. I’m almost to the chair.” I could hear the walker bumping on the wood floor.

“Where are you?” I took a sip.

“I’m at the doorway in the living room,” she replied.

“Okay, I’ll wait. Go for it.”

“I’m almost there,” she said.

“So, how are you doing?” I asked.

“Whooo! It’s hot. Is it hot there? I can’t hear you, if you are talking,” she laughed.

Mother’s walker had a basket for the phone, but the speaker was off.

“It’s 90 degrees here, Mother. I’m sitting outside on my dock in the shade.”

“Okay, I’m almost there. I’m about to squat,” she laughed again.

It was good to hear her laugh.

A few months later I forgot to pay Mother’s caregiver, Pam. The week before that, Pam called because she couldn’t cash her check. It bounced. I needed to get organized. Valerie would have done a better job. By now, the caregivers were there every day.

Pam took another job a month later, and we hired Paula to fill in a few days. When I called Paula’s references and talked to Mrs. Johnson, a lady she cared for, Mrs. Johnson told me Paula stole her jewelry and was terrible. I called her son to verify this information, and he said his mother had no jewelry, and she was confused. In hindsight, I should have listened to the old lady.

Those were difficult years as we watched Mother’s decline. I think Valerie

suffered more than I did, because she lived down the street. I tried to visit Mother once a week since I lived two hours away, but I had to be home to meet Brett's bus at 2:30. He was in second grade.

Valerie resented me taking over, after she had been there all her life, but sometimes she could be inert. I had to get the ball rolling, when I saw the empty bank account.

"Please call the Sheriff and file a report. I am on my way, but it will take two hours for me to get there. We need to close the account immediately." I grabbed my purse and coat.

"I can't get through to the Sheriff's office. No one is answering. I have been calling for thirty minutes." Valerie voice grated on my cell phone.

"You live a block away. Go down there," I said.

After Paula's arrest, Valerie drove me to the empty trailer where Paula lived. It stood in a weed-filled yard. The door hung open and trash blew in the grass. Valerie thought drug dealers lived in some of the other trailers that surrounded the area: a sad place for a little, two- year- old boy to grow up. When I saw the trailer, I was sorry we had her arrested. Her life was so bad, and we made it worse. We acted without knowing her circumstances. Maybe if we had talked to her, we could have helped her. If I thought she wasn't using the money for drugs, I would say keep the money and get out of this nightmare existence.

She had written a letter of apology to Mother. That was her way of reaching out to us. The Sheriff's office kept the letter as evidence. Paula could be very kind and considerate. She would bring her little blond- haired, blue- eyed boy to work with her sometimes. Mother loved having him running around making her laugh. Over time

though, Mother grew tired of the baby that always needed attention.

Paula helped Mother get her World War II article in the newspaper and a booklet that came with it, commemorating the family members who served there. For Christmas, Paula framed those war pictures of Mother and Dan and gave them to Valerie and me. She put tennis balls on the front of Mother's walker, so she could slide the front and not have to lift it with each step. She wrote checks for Mother's groceries, and she picked up the mail.

When she saw Mother's bank balance in a statement, she couldn't resist helping herself to some of that money. We closed the account and had Paula arrested. Of course, we never recouped any of the money. We never knew what happened to Paula or that little boy.

After Paula's arrest, Mother stayed home with Pam caring for her. She slowly declined. I think the experience with Paula weighed on her. She felt some responsibility for Paula's sad ending. She stopped eating and lost her strength to walk. I had always told her that when she couldn't walk, it would be time to go to the nursing home.

Two years before that, Mother had had a stroke that affected her left side. Her arm and leg had to be rehabilitated. A physical therapist came in three days a week to work with her. It was painful, and Mother wanted to give up. I told her the only way she could stay in her house is if she could walk. She understood it was up to her, and she did the work to rebuild her strength. She was able to live alone a few more years bumping around on her walker. She called me one morning and asked me to come see her.

"Is everything okay?" Sometimes Mother solicited me just for company.

"I think I need to go somewhere," she said.

"What do you mean? Are you ready to go to the nursing home?"

“Maybe.”

I drove to her house. Pam was there, and Mother was in bed. She looked green.

I called the ambulance and went with her to the hospital.

The doctor examined her, but I had to go back home to meet my son’s bus; otherwise they would take him back to school.

Since Valerie could not be reached, I called Pam to come stay with Mother, until Valerie arrived. I left Mother in that tenuous situation and drove the two hours back home. At 6 pm, Valerie got my numerous messages to take Mother from the hospital to the nursing home. That way her insurance would cover her first two months, if she came from the hospital to the nursing home. A nurse overheard my instructions.

“That doesn’t work, unless the doctor admits her,” she said.

Bug off, nosey.

The doctor ended up not admitting her, even though she was green. Her vitals were normal. Valerie was left with the awful duty of depositing Mother into the nursing home.

When Valerie arrived at the hospital after working all day, she couldn’t believe that I had arranged a room for Mother at the nursing home. She was overwhelmed by all my messages, but she did my bidding like the good little sister. I don’t think she would have acted to move Mother so quickly. It was left up to me to make the hard decision.

“I felt like I was poleaxed,” she said.

It was Valerie who got Mother settled into the nursing home. I did not return until days later. By that time, Mother had changed her mind about the whole arrangement and went into a deep depression. She was miserable, and her health grew worse every day with her existence there.

I kept my weekly visits to Mother, but now it was at the nursing home: one sad, terrible place for old people. I walked into Mother's private room: tiny, compared to her three-bedroom house on four acres that she had been removed from. She looked small as she sat in her bed. The walls closed in on her, and she wanted to go home. She sat bolt upright in bed, her eyes wide open. You could see the realization wash over her face that she would not go home again. She looked at her surroundings like a little child that had been robbed. It was very sad to watch.

The room had one bed. It was a ground floor with a nice window out to the world. There was a brick flower container in which I would later plant flowers so that she could see them out her window. We bought a chair and a TV, but she had no interest in anything. I tried to take her outside for a walk in her wheelchair to cheer her. She begged me to take her back to bed, where she stayed for days at a time.

Mother slowly came out of her depression and tried to join in the activities offered there. A country western band played, and I wheeled her to the lunchroom to hear them. She danced in her wheelchair, as I spun her around. Her friend, Percy, watched from the sidelines. I started to cry remembering what a great dancer Mother used to be. She saw my tears. I tried to hide my face. "This is pitiful, ain't it?" She cried too.

Mother had a reputation for cutting the rug. I can still see her dancing in the living room. Her black hair permed into soft curls, her black pointed-rim glasses alight her little pointed nose, her head down, and arms up, as her hips swayed to the music. Her bare feet stamped intricate choreography onto the wood floor. I didn't know the dance: the fox trot, or turkey in the straw, but the music was in her. She wore a house dress that was a shift, but it clung to her hour-glass figure, a little overweight but still shapely.

She was a sweater girl. That is how she described herself. It was a saying from

World War II. Buxom women were referred to as sweater girls. That was the fashion back then: a thin sweater worn with a straight skirt.

When I was very young, Jimmy Whitley, my brother's friend, said to me. "If you look like your mother, when you grow up, I will marry you." That was the night she was going out to a formal party with my dad. Her chocolate colored, lace dress was low cut and off the shoulders. It had a satin belt that accentuated her small waist. She looked like Sophia Vigara would have in the sixties. Her shoes were open-toed, spiked heels showing off her long legs.

She was a knockout. I aspired to that. I remembered a black and white picture of her either in a newspaper, or maybe it was a photo, but she was being carried off the dance floor by two men, neither of whom were my father-- her arms around their necks on either side of her. Her dress glittered, and her pointy glasses flashed the light from the camera. You could almost hear her laugh.

Many years after that those wonderful dancing scenes, as Mother aged but still lived alone, I took her to a funeral. She was getting dressed in her room. Her navy blue suit hung on her frail frame like a coat hanger-- her black hair, now white, her sparkling, blue eyes, greyed. The pearl necklace she fumbled to hook around her neck was the same color as her thin, white skin with the blue veins showing through. "I look like a Friday fart on a Saturday night," she said. I laughed. She did not.

Years later at the nursing home, I sat next to Mother in the lunchroom, as I did every week (she claimed I only came once a month). She sat in a wheelchair, very thin and feeble. Her white hair cut short in a casual way, as she referred to that haircut in happier days. She held her head in her hand.

"Mother, how are you feeling?" I asked.

“I ain’t worth a damn,” she replied.

“I’m sorry. Would you like to see some pictures?” I asked.

“Noooo, I don’t want to see no damn pictures,” she said.

“Okay, have you seen Valerie?” I asked.

“Yeah, she comes in ‘bout once a month.”

“Mother, would you like me to play the piano? I brought my books.”

“I don’t care. Do what you want to.”

This is going to be a long visit.

“Mother, I brought you an apple, do you want some?”

“No, I don’t want no damn apple.”

I cut a small piece and peeled it. I held it out to her. She took a bite, still holding her head.

I brought some cantaloupe too. Want a piece?”

“No, I don’t want no damn cantaloupe,” she said.

I cut a small piece, and she took it, still holding her head in her hand.

“Is it good?” I asked.

“No, it’s rubbery. It ain’t no good.”

“Well, go play the piano if you’re going to,” she said.

“I need to move you, so I can move this chair.” I stood up.

“Well, get on with it and quit assin’ around,” she said.

I moved her chair and placed my chair in front of the piano right next to her. I began playing “Walking after Midnight,” a Patsy Cline song, which everyone seemed to enjoy. They even applauded. I kept playing every song I knew, including “Knock, Knock, Knocking on Heaven’s Door,” and “All Along the Watchtower,” by Bob Dylan.

“There must be some kind of way out of here,” is the first line. I smiled at the irony of the song. I never imagined this would be my audience, when I learned to play these songs. I can only play five songs. I played Patsy Cline one more time, and an old white haired lady started crying, so that was my cue to stop. I was not that good anyway.

When lunch was over, and Mother was ready to go, I wheeled her back to the room. She was very impatient.

“Get on with it,” she said.

There were three wheelchairs in front of us, and Mother started shouting at them to go on.

“Judy, go around them,” she said.

“Mother, there is no room.”

“Mary, go on. Let’s go, Judy,” mother said.

Mary was in the chair in front of us. We got to mother’s hall.

“Turn left here,” she said, as if I didn’t know.

“Now, put me to bed. Push the chair up there, and put me to bed. Get on with it, Judy.”

I had to move a table out of the way to fit her wheelchair.

“Get on with it, Judy, and quit assin’ around.”

I locked her chair and stood in front of her. I folded up the foot rest and put her strong leg down for her to stand on. Her left leg was curled up from nonuse. I circled her arms around my neck and swung her pivoting on her right leg and rolled her onto the bed. It was quick and not very gentle, but it was the best I could do.

“Judy, you would never make it in this business.”

“I know.”

At least I didn't drop her, like I did at Thanksgiving at Valerie's farm two years ago, which was the last time she went out with me. I was taking her out of her wheelchair in the same way and putting her in the front seat of the car. With her arms around my neck, we started to pivot. I bumped her head on the doorway. She let go of my neck and dropped to a sitting position on my knee. I started laughing. I was holding my tiny mother on my knee balanced at the bottom of the car door. She was furious.

"Pick me up, Judy. Stop laughing."

My poor mother with her skinny little toothpick legs was straddling my knee with her diapered bottom, a most undignified position. Everyone was horrified by the sight. Valerie, Ralph, and their son, Simon, all came to the rescue to put mother in the car, because I could not lift her. I felt like a naughty child laughing, but it just cracked me up.

Now, safely tucked in her bed, Mother looked exhausted. She had not been out of the nursing home since that time. I felt bad about that, but at least she still trusted me to put her to bed.

At Mother's funeral, I didn't want to look into her dead face. I really didn't like looking into a coffin and always avoided it. It seemed barbaric to gaze upon the dead all dressed up and no place to go. Then I saw my husband leading our three children right up to the coffin, which surprised me, because he's Jewish, and we have reared our children in the Jewish faith. Coffins aren't opened at Jewish funerals.

But there they go arm- in- arm holding each other up and looking at Grandma Coker, while I hang back feeling conflicted.

She was my mother, and I saw her little pointed nose sticking up from the coffin. I was afraid to look. I remember when I saw my dad in his coffin. It jarred me, and I quickly pulled my hand from Mother's and turned and walked away, after she had ceremoniously led me down the aisle to view him.

I had been living on the West coast for twenty years and was not a regular to these family funerals, so I innocently followed her to the coffin. Everyone's eyes were on me, because I had just arrived with my new baby, Brett. My visits were a big deal to my family, and their friends.

When I saw my dad, with everyone watching my reaction, I felt my whole body push back against the reality. I left Mother standing there. I was never a comfort to her in situations like this, a selfish shortcoming on my part.

When my brother died, I was angry that I was not told for three days because I was working as a flight attendant on a trip to Pittsburg. They waited till I got home to LA to tell me. I was so angry and self-absorbed, as my sister would say. Those were her favorite words to describe me.

When I got to my mother's house, she was crying uncontrollably, but I sat there like a stoic and wouldn't go to her. Bob looked at me and motioned with his head for me to go to her, but I wouldn't. I was mad at him too for not calling me on my trip. It was a terrible day, and I thought my whole family were idiots for mishandling my brother's illness. He should not have died. I had just seen him two weeks before, and he was fine.

How could his wife let him lie in bed for days, too sick to move, and not take him to a hospital? He had flu symptoms and went to the doctor for treatment, but he got worse. It was my mother who took him to the emergency room, and he died the next day. There was never an autopsy, and he was cremated. The death certificate said it was an infection, but no one knew what it was.

The most bungled family affair I'd ever seen. From then on, I thought my family was backward compared to my sparkling new life in California. They seemed worlds away, and so was their reality.

But today is my mother's funeral. I moved back to this part of the country seven years ago and watched her decline. I should have done more to help her in the end, but once again, I couldn't handle it. I will always have guilt and regret that I didn't bring her to my lovely home and take care of her instead of leaving her in the hands of inept caregivers, so she could stay in her house. I still had three kids at home. It was a good excuse.

Today is her funeral, and my chance to redeem myself is over. With Bob and the kids standing there, I slowly make my way to her coffin. Today it is different. No one is staring at me. I blend in with the crowd and sneak in unnoticed for a closer view.

I look at her sweet face which looks good, as they say. Her pink cheeks, pink lipstick, and pink nails remind me of a phone call I received from the undertaker.

“Her nails are painted pink. Do you want to keep that?” he asked.

She had her nails done a few days before at the nursing home. She was preparing for her funeral. She had told me exactly what she wanted to wear: the pink suit.

She looked beautiful in it, like she was going to church. Her hair was done by Mary Ann, who styled Mother’s hair for years. Mary Ann was the stylist for the nursing home and the funeral home. Tears welled in my eyes. She looked so peaceful.

On her wrist was the little watch I had given her, when her other one was stolen in the nursing home. It warmed my heart to see it on her wrist. She never took it off for fear it would be stolen too. There it was still with her.

“Where did the watch come from?” I asked the funeral director.

“She came in with it on,” was his reply.

Mother, still in charge. I took it off. I still have it in my jewelry box.

At the chapel, Bob eulogized Mother with a beautiful speech.

“When I came home from the hospital, Ivah Ree called me every day to ask how I was doing. Even in her declining days she was concerned for my health. I want to thank her for my greatest gift and that is my wife, Judy.”

Bob had been in ICU with a staph infection for weeks, and mother was worried about him. We all were. He was on life support.

He was such a great speaker that I made sure never to follow him at our children's Bar and Bat Mitzvahs.

Shayne, my oldest daughter, also eulogized Mother. I advised her to go first, although her speech was beautiful and brought everyone to tears.

"I interviewed Grandma Coker for a class on aging at the University. I asked if she was afraid of dying. She said, 'No, but I am afraid of being dead.'" Shayne quoted.

Bob asked me before the service if Valerie's family would speak.

"No, they will not. I asked Valerie."

"Valerie's kids grew up in Grandma's shadow, and they will not get up and speak?" Bob couldn't believe it.

Valerie could be stubborn. There was no explaining it.

Ashli, Valerie's oldest daughter was a brilliant law student at George Washington University who made law review and finished at the top of her class. I was sure she was accustomed to public speaking. No. She would not stand up and speak. Ralph and Valerie were accomplished musicians and singers. I asked them to sing "Amazing Grace," Mother's favorite song. No. They would not.

Simon, Valerie and Ralph's son, bought Grandpa Dan's El Camino a few years ago. Mother sold it to him and then got mad at him for buying it. I think she cursed him out. Mother would go off on someone out of the blue like that. Maybe they were holding

a grudge.

Mother would go off on me too, when she would come to California, or if I came to Georgia, but I chalked it up to ‘crazy ol’ lady,’ and never dwelled on it.

Valerie was exposed to Mother’s behavior more often. It wore her down. I lived across the country and got on an airplane to get away.

Valerie had nothing good to say about Mother and sat at the funeral with her family in smug silence while my family, the west coast, Jewish outsiders, said all the right things. It was uncomfortable.

To say my relationship with my sister was strained is putting it mildly. We continued to fight about everything just like when we were kids. Valerie took good care of Mother for 20 years. She resented my taking over Mother’s care, when I moved back to Georgia for the last seven years of Mother’s life. It was a power struggle, and I was better at it. Even when we settled Mother’s estate and sold her property, we tried to be civil, but often we were at odds. I don’t think that is unusual in families dividing property.

After the funeral I went to Mother’s house and put three things in my car: her mink stole, the water jug my brother brought back from Vietnam, and an old family portrait of mother and her siblings, taken when she was about 21.

I thought Valerie was channeling mother, when she called me the next day and

screamed in my ear.

“You can’t have it. You can’t have it.”

She was out of control. I tried to reason with her.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know what I am talking about, and you better bring it back, you Biiiiitch!”

Mother sounded that way, when she freaked out.

“Okay, calm down of course I’ll bring it back.”

After that she locked Mother’s house, and I was never allowed to go back for anything, until the house was sold, and she had taken all the pictures and anything else she wanted. I had told her she could have anything, because she had been there all those years, while I was absent. She was executor of the will, so it didn’t matter what I said.

I made the drive to return the items to her. I had just as much right to them as she did, but I only wanted to make peace. I was sure that I would regret it someday, not so much the mink but the water jug. It was all we had left of our brother.

The water jug sat on Mother’s dining room table all those 44 years, after he died. Valerie and I both wanted it. We clung to it, as if it were him, but it was only a thing. We held onto things, hoping for a glimpse of the people we lost. It is a sad thing, grief. After Valerie died, I asked her husband, Ralph, if I could come and pick up the water jug. He

didn't know what I was referring to.

"It's the terra-cotta vase on your mantel."

"I didn't know what that was," he reasoned. "Sure come get it."

Interesting that what Valerie and I had fought over meant nothing to Ralph, but Valerie and I fought over everything. It's how we related to each other.

Looking back I think that is how I relate to everyone. Fighting. But fighting is usually arguing, and arguing helps solve problems by airing them out. None of the people in my life were shrinking violets.

Will I call my children, "all, sons of bitches," two days before I die, like my mother did?

My family visited Mother in the nursing home, as she lay in bed. I told her we had just come from a UGA football game.

"Did you win?" she asked.

"Yes. It was a good game."

"Well, good," she said.

"We have to go, Mother, we have to get Kristy home to catch her ride back to school."

"Well go on, sons of bitches, all of you," she barked.

It was a little shocking to hear, but she was given to cursing all her life.

Kristy had totaled Grandma's car. We had taken the car from Mother's vacant house, while she was in the nursing home. Kristy drove it to college and loaned it to a friend to drive to Atlanta. Her friend totaled it. Mother knew we had her car and sometimes asked.

"How's my car?"

"Its fine," I said not convincingly.

"Bullshit," was her reply.

We were all sons of bitches from her point of view. She lay helplessly in bed, and everything she knew and loved was taken from her, one by one, as we go back to our merry, full, meaningful lives.

"It was the medication," my aunt Fay, mother's sister, said at the funeral the next week. "That was what made her say it," she explained.

Mother had not taken her meds in two months, probably precipitating her death. She stopped taking them because I told her it was the only thing keeping her alive. I got tired of hearing her say she wanted to die every time I visited her.

Without her medication her rosy cheeks came back, but she had congestive heart failure, so she would not last long.

A harsh, cruel truth-- I felt bad, after she died. I tried to sooth my guilt by telling myself that I had given back to her the control of her life. She had no control of anything since I put her into the nursing home.

After Mother died, Valerie and I struggled with her absence. We both were depressed for a few months trying to look back and hope we did the best we could for her, knowing we probably did not. I had my young family to distract me while Valerie's depression grew.

Valerie and Ralph had moved to the family cabin on forty acres they inherited, when Ralph's father died. A rustic, one room dwelling, on two lakes provided a sanctuary for Valerie to write. She spent seven years writing her novel, *Bailey Waites*. Typical of Valerie, her book won a writer's contest with a cash prize, and she signed with an agent. That same year she took her life. The book was never published.

Chapter Summaries

4

The Times They Are a-Changin'

(1970-1972)

Judy and her roommates shoplift to make ends meet. They would go into a dressing room at Casual Corner and put on multiple blouses and pants and walk out. They couldn't afford the clothing otherwise.

She ends up in jail for a few hours with Scarface. The scene with Scarface is very telling of the difference in the two inmates. Judy is there daring the system as a prank, while Scarface has cut her husband with a knife. That day, Judy sees the underbelly of Atlanta and never shoplifts again.

Most of her friends have no jobs and are living off their parents while going to school, or they are drop out freeloaders. It is not easy to sleep and get up at 7 am for a job, when her friends are staying up all night playing music and smoking pot in her living room. She and her roommates try throwing them out, but when that doesn't work, the girls split up and move out of the hippie district on 14th street, where it's easy to get in trouble.

Judy moves in with two school teachers. She enrolls in school at Georgia State University and meets Bob, a nice Jewish boy. They move into a modern loft apartment on Buford Highway and live together for two years while going to school. As serious

students, they make dean's list every quarter. Judy proposes marriage to Bob, but he declines, so Judy moves to Washington D.C. and goes to work as a flight attendant for United Airlines. She doesn't want to waste time in a relationship that's going nowhere.

5

Coffee, Tea, or Me

(1972-1976)

Living in the nation's capital in 1972 is a very exciting time in US history. In *The Washington Post* that lands on her doorstep every morning, Judy reads "The Watergate Scandal," written by the famous journalists, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Her roommate, Rosie, joins the Nixon-Airs who are flight attendants working the Republican Convention of 1972, in Miami.

While flying first class on a ski trip with her friend, she meets Senator Ted Kennedy and sends him a note to join her in first class for a drink. He sits in coach with his constituents only a few short years after the Chappaquiddick scandal involving Kennedy's single vehicle car accident on Chappaquiddick Island, Massachusetts and the drowning death of Mary Jo Kopechne, in 1969.

He never comes up to first class, but Judy waits for him to deplane, and he very graciously shakes her hand. It is a humorous scene in the book with historical significance. Judy wants to shake the hand of the Kennedy who would one day be known as the Lion of the Senate after 50 years of service. Famous people that Judy meets on her flights to Hawaii are portrayed in vignettes as a day in the life of a flight attendant.

During those 18 months that Judy lives in Washington D.C., Bob sends flowers and begs her to come back to him in Atlanta. He wants to marry her and employs his mother, Betty, to call Judy on his behalf and try to convince her. This doesn't work very well, but when the air conditioner breaks in her apartment, she flies to Atlanta to see Bob.

Over Labor Day weekend, they smoke hash for three days and decide to elope. With a soap-opera blaring on TV in the background, a portent of their future, a Justice of the Peace pronounces them man and wife. They take that honeymoon hash to Hawaii.

Judy converts to Judaism at The Washington National Hebrew Congregation on Massachusetts Ave. in Washington, D.C., a large congregation with five Rabbis. She attends Hebrew school with Rabbi Fink, but she has to miss three classes for her flight schedule. Instead of requiring Judy to make up the classes, the Rabbi advises her to live "Jewishly" and sends her on her way.

7

The Family

(1982-1994)

Three children are born in seven years, and Bob wants to name all of them after cowboys. He names their first daughter, Shayne, after the famous movie, *Shane*, starring Alan Ladd. Judy loves to call her loudly from the balcony of their house in Newport Beach, California. "Shane, Shane, come back Shane"-- a tearful, famous line from the end of the movie. She changes the spelling to Shayne. When Kristy is born, three years later, Bob wants to name her after Corpus Christi, Texas, where he grew up. When the

nurse thinks Kristy Leigh's name is Christ Leigh, they realize that Jews don't name their children Christi, unless they change the spelling.

This chapter follows the three cross-country moves the young family makes, as Bob works for different companies. When his brother, Jerry, sells his family business, Bob stays on with the new company for many years, until a head hunter calls to offer him a job in Nashville. He takes the job for the big signing bonus, plus he would be president of the company. It looks good on paper, but after two years in Nashville, the company files for bankruptcy, and Bob has invested his signing bonus in the company.

This is also during the Michael Milken Junk Bond days, and Bob's stock is worth ten cents on the dollar. The president of Bob's former company did some jail time in a similar junk bond deal. This is also the time of the famous Black Monday stock market crash of 1987. Bob loses one quarter of a million dollars in stock. He has hedged his stock on a margin that the stock would go up and pay for the new stock.

When the market crashes, the margins are called at \$50,000 each for two months. The family moves back to California, jobless, in debt, and pregnant with their son, Brett who was named after Brett Maverick. Bob's father pays the margin calls.

Sometimes Judy doesn't know how to be a Jewish mom. When the children are small, she gets a Christmas tree, in defiance of Bob. Christmas is tough in a Jewish household.

8

Keep on Truckin'

(1994- 1996)

Bob moves the family to Montgomery, Alabama, where he takes a new position with his old company. At the Waffle House, on their first night, all three children cry. Financially it should have been a good move. The children attend private schools, because the public school buildings crumble with age. Even the private school's old buildings leak. In shock after living in Newport Beach, California where the Corona del Mar High School pool was home to the water polo team of the 1988 Summer Olympics, in Los Angeles, Judy drives them to school.

Judy works hard to find friends. Recruited and dismissed from more than one tennis team, when they discover that just because Judy hails from California doesn't mean she can play a strong game.

"Do you surf?" is the prevailing question for Shayne in school.

After two years, the company fires Bob in a reorganization. To make ends meet, he commutes to Maryland as a consultant for a year and comes home on weekends. Living apart from the family puts a strain on the marriage. Judy feels like a single mom helping the kids adjust to the move and starting over with schools and friends. The next year, Bob accepts a job offer in Cartersville, Georgia-- another move for the family and new adjustments.

Bob and Judy had met in Atlanta, and like coming home, they moved and didn't look back.

9

ICU

(1996-2002)

Back in Georgia, Judy renews her relationship with her sister, Valerie. She joins in the family tradition of Thanksgiving on Valerie's farm. They reminisce about their childhood days and catch up on the twenty years that Judy lived on the west coast. In this chapter, stories surrounding the death of their brother, Wayne, and their father play out.

The children find the move to Cartersville equally difficult. Brett, age seven, doesn't come out of his room for a week, until Judy goes across the street where she knows a little boy lives. She introduces herself and asks if he can come over and meet her son. The boys become best friends and remain friends today.

Shayne, in 10th grade, takes a year to feel settled, like all the other moves. Kristy, entering seventh grade, her Bat Mitzvah year, wonders if she has friends for a party. As it turns out, Kristy knows the Rabbi from Camp Coleman, a Jewish camp she's attended each summer since fifth grade. Her friends in Atlanta from camp make the transition easier for her, but she hates school.

Bob's father passes away in 1996, the year of the Atlanta Olympics. Bob and Judy make the sad trip back to California. Kristy goes to summer camp, and Shayne and Brett are left in the care of Bob's new boss who has a college-age daughter to help her.

In moving to Cartersville, Bob takes a pay cut. The arguments begin, and Judy goes to work part time at the golf shop to help out. Expenses grow as the children get older and need cars and college. That summer Shayne turns 16 and takes a part-time job at the marina.

Judy plans a ski trip with the children, because Bob doesn't like to ski. Angry about the expense, Bob feels Judy isn't budgeting their money. On Bob's birthday, Judy suggests they go out and celebrate, since all the children are home, but Bob would rather stay home and pout.

Valerie invites them to her 50th birthday party. The children leave with their friends, so Judy drives two hours to Valerie's party. Her band is playing, and Judy wants to make a video tape as a gift to Valerie. Maybe she will let Judy sing "Walking after Midnight," her old standard.

When Judy gets home late that night, Shayne sits on Bob's bed. He can't move his back. The next day, Judy calls the doctor for a muscle relaxant and a pain pill. Bob falls asleep on the heating pad. During the night, he turns it to high and the cover of the heating pad comes off giving him a third degree burn on his back.

This chapter details the ordeal in ICU, with a staph infection that travels along the path of an old steroid shot in Bob's back. The blood poisoning transmits to his spine and brain. In an induced coma for 18 days in ICU over his birthday and Hanukkah, Bob can't move. The Rabbi comes in to say the "Me Sheberach," a prayer for healing. Every complication the cardiologist said might happen, does happen, but Bob, who arrived in great shape, survives. If he had come in with any precondition, he would not have made it.

The little town of Cartersville sends a vortex of prayers to God. They bring food. Every doctor in town calls the hospital in Rome to find out Bob's condition. They want to see him because they are stunned that this vibrant, 52- year- old man who runs six miles every day and works out in the gym is on life support.

He survives that terrible ordeal: eight days on a ventilator, twelve days in ICU, losing thirty pounds, and learning to walk again. Following his release from the hospital with a ten week program of antibiotic by infusion every twenty four hours through a stint to his heart, Bob makes a full recovery and returns to work three months later.

11

I won't be here when you get Home

(2007-2009)

Valerie drives to her forty acre farm, a pastoral setting where she takes her life. Her husband finds her on the short cut home through the woods surrounding their property. Her car is filled with carbon monoxide, and Valerie is in the back seat, so he breaks the window and pulls her out. When she doesn't respond, he puts her back in the car and drives to the hospital.

He calls her sister, Judy, who is shocked and angry that she didn't know Valerie was suicidal. Judy blames Valerie's family for not taking care of Valerie, when she needed help. Judy looks back over the previous year and sees clues in Valerie's behavior and realizes that she, too, is at fault for not helping her.

Judy talks to each family member and some of Valerie's close friends to learn more about her condition. She sees that their reaction to Valerie's threats to kill herself are similar to her own. Everyone has a level of shock and disbelief. The thought that no one helped Valerie is painful to Judy, and she feels remorse.

About the Author



Judy Benowitz is studying for her MA in Professional Writing at Kennesaw State University, in Georgia. She has a BA in Drama from the University of California, Irvine. Her many TV, Stage, and Screen Credits include *Archie's Place*, starring Carrol O'Connor at CBS Studios in Los Angeles and *The Gong Show*, a Chuck Barris Production. Benowitz appeared in The University of Southern California Cinema's *Boy with Wings*. She played Rosie Alvarez on stage at The Laguna Forum's *Bye Bye Birdie*, in Laguna Beach, California and has additional training in ballet, freestyle, and voice.

Her publishing credits include the following:

Anthologies:

"Nursing Home Cafeteria," Deborah Ford's *Grits (Girls Raised in the South)*, published by Dutton.

"Ivah Ree's Fixer Upper," *Brush Brooms and Straw Ticks*, Hometown Memories Publishing Company, Hickory, North Carolina.

Magazines:

"Buck," *The Georgia Writers Association's* digital magazine, *The Georgia Authority*.

"Cattle Rustlers," *The Georgia Writers Association's* digital magazine, *The Georgia Authority*.

“Boater-head,” won first place in the *Georgia Writers Museum’s* 2015 Creative Writing Contest.

Books:

“The Ties that Bind,” is a forward to the book, *Heroically Well Adjusted*, by Greg Langford, Amazon publishing.

She is also writing her memoir, where many of her short stories originate.

Honors:

2016 Who’s Who among Students in American Universities and Colleges, Kennesaw State University, Georgia.

