Writers’ Night
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Risking

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Finding My Wings

I am not a morning person. Even though I loved being there, 0700 hours seemed too early to be standing on the tarmac at a small airport in southern Minnesota. The pilots around me looked happy to be awake, though. Maybe they were actually excited to get the contest started. Not me. I was cold. I felt scared and sick. Another pilot offered me coffee, mentioning that I did not look too good. I refused. I was beyond coffee.

I was going to fly in an aerobatic contest. It had been my goal to fly the Sportsman sequence in a contest ever since I started flying aerobatics two years earlier. In competition aerobatics, pilots fly a prepublished sequence of maneuvers, like loops and rolls, and are scored on the perfection of the flight. This all takes place within a 1000 meter square “box” of air in the sky at a safe altitude of at least 1500 feet above the ground. I had been practicing for months and expected to be nervous, but nothing prepared me for the doubts that flashed through my mind in the moments before my flight. I can’t do this. I haven't practiced enough. I'll forget where I am. Oh, I wish Herb was here to help me.

Had my friend Herb been at the contest with me, he would have told me a joke, made me laugh and relax. But, he wasn’t there. He had died in a crash while flying aerobatics a few months before. I was on my own. I stood frozen by my plane as I watched pilots get ready to fly, judges get ready to score, propellers spin as engines started and I thought back. Back four years to when I first met Herb.

Just thinking about Herb made me smile. He was 50 or so, his exact age never seemed important. What was important was his hearty laugh, his jokes and his positive attitude. It was impossible to be near Herb and feel down. His mischievous smile rubbed off on anyone around him and made everyone feel good to be alive. Herb was an avid aerobatic pilot and competition judge. When he wasn’t flying, teaching someone to fly, or judging a contest, he was teaching
others how to be competition judges at judging schools throughout the country.

I was at a judges school with my boyfriend, an aspiring aerobatic pilot who flew cargo for a living. I was interested in aviation but didn’t think I could accomplish a feat like getting my pilot’s license, let along fly aerobatics. My boyfriend didn’t help. He told me flying would be “too hard” for me. And, part of me believed him. As I sat in the judge’s school learning about the proper lines, angles and rules of competition, getting my license and flying in a contest were far-away dreams that seemed too difficult to tackle. Meeting Herb changed everything.

Herb picked up on my desire to fly and took me under his wing. As the instructor of the judges school, he singled me out to answer questions. At first, I was scared I would make a fool out of myself. I didn’t believe I was smart enough to know the answers. But I was. Each time Herb asked a question, I knew the answer. I was surprised in myself. I was also surprised that someone took so much interest in me, a non-pilot in a classroom full of pilots, many of them professionals with thousands of hours in the air. Throughout the weekend, Herb challenged me, encouraged me to strive for more than I thought I could accomplish. He convinced me I should follow my dreams and learn how to fly.

The next day I signed up for flying lessons and started training in earnest. Soon, the old boyfriend took a hike, probably thinking I would never get into an aircraft, let alone fly aerobatics, without his help. He was wrong. There were times when I felt like giving up. I lacked self-confidence. I ran out of money more than once and had to borrow from my family and friends. But always in my mind was the knowledge that Herb belived in me and I kept forging ahead. Finally, on April 3rd, 1992, one year, seven months, and three days from the day of my first lesson, I got my pilot’s license.

So, there I was, near the end of the 1995 competition season, stumbling around the Albert Lea Airport, getting ready for my first Sportsman flight. Herb was gone and I was scared to death. What am I doing here anyway? I thought as I looked at the other pilots who appeared confident and calm as they readied their planes.

Then, it was my turn. It was now or never. My plane was waiting and I was glued to the airport tar. I wanted to run away and
hide. I wanted to forget about flying in a contest and start knitting for a hobby. Then, I heard a voice, “You can do it, Myrna.” Herb’s voice. “Come on, get up there and show ’em what you’re made of.”

I strapped on my parachute, climbed into the plane and adjusted the tangle of seat belts around me. Now that I was in the plane, surrounded by the familiar black interior, knobs, gauges and dials, I felt a little better but my nerves were still a jumble. I went through the starting checklist. Zero the altimeter. Zero the G-meter. Check the radios. Make sure everything was secure so no sunglasses, keys, or spare change would float by my head at the most inopportune moment. The airplane was ready but my legs were shaking so badly that I had to hold the stick in one hand and try to steady my legs with the other. Why am I doing this? I wondered as I started the engine.

“Come on Myrna.” Herb’s voice echoed through my head. “You can do this. Let’s get going.” I taxied my plane out to the runway, took off and started to climb.

"Okay, get yourself set up" It was as though Herb was in the back seat, coaching me. I climbed to altitude and got ready for the first maneuver, a two-point roll. “Good, now here we go...Get ready...Roll!” I pitched up a fraction and shoved the stick all the way to the left to turn the plane upside down. “Great, now hang there for a second, stay level. Okay, back up now” I brought the stick back to center and rolled the plane upright. “Good job. Now get ready for the next one.” I flew the next few maneuvers, not perfectly, but well enough.

Then, I started to have fun. My anxiety was still there but rechanneled into adrenaline that kept me strong while the forces of gravity pushed and pulled me around the cockpit. Finally, my last figure complete, I rocked my wings to let the judges know I was done and started my descent.

“You’re not done yet,” Herb’s voice reminded me as I started to relax. “You have one more maneuver, you have to land.” At first it sounded silly, then I remembered what Herb had once told me. After the rush of flying a sequence, pilots sometimes “forgot” to fly all the way to the ground. Contest landings were often more interesting to watch than contest flying.
I lined up for the runway. “Okay, Myrna. Hold it...let her settle...your speed’s fine...hold it another second. Good, job!” I could almost feel my coach pat me on the back as the wheels touched the runway.

Now I couldn’t wait to get my feet on solid ground. I taxied to the holding area, my legs so weak it felt like I was pushing bricks instead of rudder pedals, I pulled the power to idle and the mixture to lean. The engine stopped, I flipped the switches off, opened the door and climbed out of my plane. I had done it! I had really flown in my first Sportsman contest.

For a moment, I stood there and looked at the plane. I was almost surprised to see that it was empty. Herb wasn’t with me in the plane - I flew all by myself. But in my mind he was there, clear as day, looking at me with his fatherly grin saying, “You did it Myrna. I knew you could.”
Paul Fjelstad

Brainsaws Like Chainsaws

I’m a wood sculptor, I’m a poet.
I want to sculpt pieces that provoke dreams.
I want to write poems with lofty themes.
But what I want is not what I get.

I stand before an imposing trunk,
a dead elm waiting to be transformed,
my chainsaw wanting to gouge and cut,
but I can’t get the thing to start,

A piece of paper’s in front of my nose
a blank sheet waiting to be transformed,
my brainsaw longing to shape ideas,
but somehow it just won’t get going.

I give the startrope many a tug,
in between I check the gas,
set the chock, both on and off,
check to see the plug has spark,
all, it seems, to no avail.
I think it’s time to take a break.

I try to jumpstart it with Keats,
perk it up with morning coffee,
relax it later with alcohol,
try a little free association,
but all that’s tried is doomed to fail,
so it’s time to take a break.

Back to the elm and wondering
what symbols might be carved out here.
Pythagoras triangulated?
Mobius as a one-sided man?
Cantor cast as aleph-nought?
But nought is wrought—
I pull and pull;
saw still won’t start.

Then back to the paper and mulling over what themes to be crafted and put down here.

Heraclitus and Parmenides?
Luther and, perhaps, Aquinas?
Schrodinger and Heisenberg?
Two sides of ontological, theological and physical coins. But all’s in vain with a no-start brain.

I try once more with the stubborn chainsaw, some hearty pulls and a big surprise, it groans and spits, then sputters to life. I start to carve Pythagoras straddling an icosahedron at his feet, but soon I recognize I lack the skill. The nose is all wrong and I’ve cut too deep, so I take time out to think about salvation.

The recalcitrant brain gets one more chance. In a rhyming game, to my great surprise, it suddenly starts to improvise, so I cut out ideas like fluxing waves and permanent particles, plus graceful waves and good works particles, but soon it’s clear I lack the expertise, for the pieces are crudely cut and the fit is bad, so it’s time for a rest to ponder what can be salvaged.

After trimming and chipping and trimming some more Pythagoras metamorphoses into a chainsaw working on an icosahedral brain inside of which, with a finer tool, is carved a miniature replica of the chainsaw working on a brain.

After trying this and trying that, crumpling one sheet after another, the hoped for ontological and theological gold is transmuted to a simple leaden coin, so all I manage is a pennyworth result, with a chainsaw on one side and a brainsaw on the other.
I’m a wood sculptor. I’m a poet.
sculpted a piece which refers to itself.
I crafted a poem which does the same.
That’s not what I wanted, but I’ll take what I get.
On the Way to Hell

When I tell people I lived as a young woman in Norway for four-and-a-half years during the fifties, they ask, “What were you doing in Norway?” The best answer I can give is “Having babies,” because that’s just what I was doing, as the wife of a pilot in the Royal Norwegian Air Force. I wasn’t there as a tourist, or even as an American, but as a Norwegian military wife. It was like going back 50 years in time to a country with a different language. Norway was still recovering from the German occupation of World War II, housing was scarce, and the economy was depressed. However, my new husband, Bjarne Kristiansen, assured me there were “no poor people in Norway.” The Norwegian people “didn’t have everything they wanted,” but had “everything they needed to live a happy life.”

We flew out of New York City on March 18, 1953, headed for our new home in Norway. We were on board a commercial Icelandic Airline four engine propeller plane. The days of jet travel had not yet arrived. It was my first experience at flying and my first trip out of the country.

Bjarne said we would live in Norway for four years, until he finished his Norwegian military duty as an instructor pilot. Then, we would come back to live in the United States, as he felt it was more important for a girl to live near her parents. So, in leaving for Norway, I knew we would be back, and that was reassuring. At the same time, I was filled with wonder about my home-to-be in “The Land of the Midnight Sun.”

We landed in Iceland and stayed the night, due to mechanical problems. In the small Reykjavik hotel I noticed the first cultural differences. The doorknobs were no longer round, the beds were narrow with down covers, and the toilet paper was one step away from a page in the Sears Roebuck catalog. When in flight again,
Bjarne very carefully informed me, “Most Norwegians own neither washing machines nor cars."

My new parents-in-law met us at the Oslo airport, after our flight the next day. We all proceeded to a hotel, as we planned to stay a day or two before we traveled on to the family home in Lillehammer. Bjarne’s parents did not speak English, but they were very nice, joyful people, and I felt accepted right away. The only Norwegian words I could speak were “Takk” and “Skoal,” so it was awkward trying to interact without the use of language. That night Godtfred had brought provisions to the hotel for celebrating our marriage and the reunion with his son. We “skoaled” in Bjarne’s parents’ room until I couldn’t “skoal” any more. I was very tired from my trip and went to our room for some rest.

The next day, while Bjarne was busy taking care of required military processing, his parents took me by bus to Frogner Park, where the many outdoor granite sculptures of Vigeland were displayed. It was the first time I had seen sculptures of people without clothes. There weren’t even fig leaves. My father-in-law, Godtfred, proceeded to explain to me what the sculptures were all about. While speaking Norwegian, he was able to communicate to me, through gestures and body language, the profound significance of these works of art. I was able to understand that life, from birth to death, was depicted by these beautiful pieces. I gave my father-in-law an “A” in his first role of crossing the language barrier to introduce me to Norwegian culture.

Upon arriving by train in Lillehammer, we passed the family home at Thorstadveien 15. We saw Bjarne’s sister, Bjorg, hanging out an upstairs window, waving to us. The house was large, painted red, and sat high on the side of a steep hill overlooking the Mjosa, the largest lake in Norway. We soon drove up to the home by taxi, and after settling in, Bjarne took me to the basement to show me his mother’s “laundry room.” There in the corner of the basement was what looked like a huge copper kettle on top of a wood burning stove. It even had a copper lid. I found that Norwegians started a fire and boiled their clothes clean. This was enough to convince me that I would be doing a lot of washing by hand.

The Kristiansen home was very clean, and tastefully decorated, with bare floors covered by a few long rag rugs. Even though it was
March, and there was still snow outside, the windows were open in some rooms, and there was no heat in the house. That’s when I decided that the first thing I would invest in was a thick Norwegian sweater! Norwegians are fond of fresh air in their homes all year long, I found. There was no central heating, and the thresholds of the doors between rooms were about three inches high. That insured keeping the warmth from the wood burning stove inside a heated room. When the door was closed tightly against the threshold, the room stayed warm.

That evening I tasted my first home cooked Norwegian meal. Hjordis, my mother-in-law, served a festive dinner for the occasion. It was the first time I had seen, smelled, and eaten lutefisk. I soon learned my first Norwegian word for this experience: “UFF DA!” Instead of bread, there was something called “lefse,” which resembled a cloth napkin. I found that, if you rolled the lutefisk in a piece of lefse along with some potatoes and lots of butter, salt and pepper, the slimy texture of the fish could be disguised. For dessert, there was something called “fruktsuppe” (fruit soup), with a good fruit taste, but was also on the under-jelled and slimy side.

The next morning, a large “frukost bord” (breakfast table) was set with bowls of assorted crackers, crisp breads, and freshly sliced brown breads. There were all kinds of cheeses: Gouda, Edam, Jarlsberg, and one called “gjetost,” which was brown and rectangular, and looked like Fels Naptha soap. This was goat cheese, which tasted good on crackers or sweet bread. Fish in various forms of preservation was displayed: smoked, pickled, dried, salted and rotted. I learned to like the “rakefisk” (rotten fish) spread thinly on “flotbrod” (flatbread). There was also a variety of familiar foods to choose from: soft boiled eggs, sliced tomatoes and cucumbers, and home-made head cheese. All of these foods were eaten on open-faced sandwiches. The object was to butter a piece of bread, called “smorbrod,” lay on a piece of cheese and maybe a slice of egg and tomato. This was topped with an anchovy or some pink caviar spread, which came out of a tube, like toothpaste. It was eaten with a knife and fork, the fork in the left hand, held upside down, while transporting it to the mouth. Balancing peas on a moving upside down fork was especially tricky.
“Home” for us turned out to be with Bjarne’s family in Lillehammer, until we could find housing on Vaemes Airbase at Stjordal, near Trondheim. We were given a large bedroom upstairs which his parents had furnished with a beautiful, multi-pieced bedroom set (our wedding present). The room had a balcony with a view of the Lake Mjosa, surrounded by hills dotted with farms, a picture postcard fairyland. I was to stay there indefinitely, while Bjarne was at Vaernes, an eight hour train ride away. We saw each other every other weekend while waiting our turn for housing on the base. We were told the waiting list was long. My father-in-law finally put an ad for a room in the Stjordal newspaper. The ad was answered a month later. The room was on a farm in Hell.
All day, watching the communion of ravens
casting *Urim and Thummim* on the ragged hem of my lawn.

In the distance, a couple of crows turn their black backs
pecking away at the dead, now breaded with the trampled
gravel.

All day, I have been startled when I wanted to feel safe.
Today is *Rosh Hashanah*, the wind wreathes its lips, sounding its
shofar.

On days like this, prayers bleed in the veins of leaves,
and I hear their pages turning, akin, chanting crows again.

*Avinu Malkeinu* (Our Father, Our King).
*Caw, caw, caw*: the crows, satisfied, smack their beaked lips, fly
off.

*Avinu Malkeinu. The crows caw.*
(It is written.)

*Divinatory knucklebones or “dice” used by Jewish priests, probably
copied from the oracular knucklebones said to have been invented by
Hermes. Kings of Israel governed their acts by the prophecies of Urim
and Thummim (I Samuel 28:6).*
Lori Stoltz

Nests

All around me today, nests, abandoned nests in the treetops. I notice them now that the trees are becoming bald from winter moving in their marrow. Still, something seems sad with all these endless nests unattended today in the trees. Recently, I read how a poet lived so long in one place that the birds built nests woven with her white hair. Closing the book in jealousy, I imagine this: If I must lose my own hair from medicine, I will bend over, brushing my hair in the wind, streamers of surrender, while the birds furiously make their nests, white eggs against my black hair.
In the early 1980’s, the New York office of the non-profit organization for which I worked moved from 119th Street and Claremont on the Upper West Side of Manhattan to a tiny set of third-floor apartments in Hoboken, New Jersey. In the spring of 1982 we decided to find a place back in New York City. Looking for space in the City meant checking out places in rough territory and climbing stairs over piles of garbage to see filthy rooms. As we were looking at one horrible place that cost a fortune I asked the realtor, “Why is the price so high for such a dump?” He replied, “It’s empty.” During one of our wanders on the Lower East Side we came across an old Catholic school building that looked abandoned. To us the building looked promising in spite of the fact the school was between Avenue A and Avenue B on 4th Street, an area known as Alphabet City, drug dealing territory. We inquired about the building. It was about 100 years old; had been vacant for years and years; the windows were covered in galvanized sheet metal; and it was in need of complete renovation – at least if anyone wanted to work or live in it. After very little negotiation the church offered the building to us for $1.00 a year – provided we would agree to renovate the space. We agreed to the deal.

There was very little money available for renovation. We figured it could be done using the skills of people we knew, in-kind contributions and a lot of volunteer help. The most expensive item needed to renovate the four-story building was wallboard. One day George, Tim and I were hanging out over at the place in Hoboken wondering where we could get enough wallboard to renovate the school on 4th Street. I said, “Let’s just go ahead and call a few wallboard companies.” I went to the phone book and began to look up telephone numbers for wallboard companies in the area. I was talking to myself, wondering which company to call first and who to ask for. Tim said, “Oh, go ahead just call any one of them, take a chance and ask for the President.” I called the first company on the list and the President picked up the phone. I was surprised and launched into the story of
the organization, what our hopes were for working on the Lower East Side and told him about the 100-year old school building that we needed to renovated. He said, “Now, what can I do for you?” “Well,” I said, “what we need most is wallboard.” He paused and said, “Write me a letter telling me how much you’ll need and I’ll see what I can do.” I thanked him and got his name and contact information.

We began calculating how many sheets we would need to convert a four-story one hundred year old school building into living quarters, offices and training space. I said, without any idea at all, "How about 200 to 250 sheets." George said, "Well, we probably will need at least 1000." I thought the request was outrageously optimistic, but said, “Well why not, if we ask for a lot, maybe we’ll get something.” I wrote a letter to the President asking for 1000 sheets of wallboard.

About a month later I was sitting in the office and got a call from a warehouse out on Long Island. A man said, "Your wallboard is here. Where and when would you like it delivered?" I was stunned and could barely speak. I said, "How much wallboard is there?" He said, “two flat-bed trucks stacked high – probably about 1000 sheets.” I said, "We have to figure out when to have it delivered. Can I call you back?" I hung up the phone and thought, "This can't be true. They can't have given us all the wallboard." I was in a state of shock. I called them back just to hear it again and they said, "Yes, we have two flatbed truck loads full of wallboard for your organization." That is a lot of wallboard!

We put our heads together and picked a Saturday to have the wallboard unloaded on 4th Street right there in Alphabet City. We planned a workday for the Saturday, hired a crane company to load the wallboard onto the crane, swing it through the windows and into the building where the volunteers would stack it. We called everyone we thought might be remotely interested in helping. A few really sturdy guys, Black Muslims from Mid-Town, were hired to work side by side with suburbanites from New Jersey, Long Island and Connecticut. Unloading required a permit, a covering over the sidewalk, and someone official paid to watch the street blockade. We didn't want to pay the city and figured we could keep people away from the loading operation ourselves. Tim volunteered for street duty. He wore an official looking jacket, actually a baseball jacket which looked official if you didn’t get to close to him. He put on a borrowed yellow hard hat; put a couple of sawhorses at either end of
the street; stuck a few dollars in his pocket in case he was questioned by an official; and positioned himself at the busiest end of 4th Street.

All sorts of volunteers showed up on the Saturday of the unloading. The two trucks where were full-sized, flatbed semi-trailers. The school was so old we were afraid one large pile of wallboard in each room would put a dangerous amount of stress on the building. George had calculated the weight of the wallboard and had made a plan for distributing it throughout so it wouldn't unbalance the building and collapse the floors. That meant the sheet metal covering all of the windows had to be removed so the wallboard could be unloaded through the windows. This was a tricky operation that involved removing the nails and hanging out the window, turning the sheet metal sideways and bringing it in through the window. On the upper floors we took some safety precautions, especially in the attic where there were three windows, side by side, all covered with sheet metal. We tied a rope to a pillar in the attic and tied it around the waist of the person removing the coverings from the outside of the building. Other folks stood to the sides of him in order to grab each side of a sheet as it came loose and to pull it sideways in through the window. We did have several people on the street, keeping people away from the area.

We encountered one problem at the start of the day. The owner of the crane company wanted to be the boss of the unloading. He was sure that the most efficient way of unloading was to have all the wallboard for each floor brought in through one window on that floor. He gave directions to the crane operator. After the owner left we talked to the crane operator who agreed to lift the boards to each window so the weight would be distributed according to the plan. At the end of the day, the fellows driving and unloading the trucks and the crane operator said, "We have never had a load unloaded this fast-ever."

We spent the whole day unloading wallboard. No one paid any extra attention to a large crane going down the street, the two huge trucks taking up about half the block or to the guy in the hard hat at the end of the street. The unloading crew was great. No one was injured inside or outside the building. There were no run-ins with police or other city officials. There were no shots fired on the street.
that day and the building didn’t groan under the weight of the wallboard. The team of people worked exceptionally well together and were pleased and very tired. At the end of the day, after having eaten dozens of donuts, everyone was really hungry. We brought in food and celebrated in one of the classrooms. After we had feasted we cleaned up in the mop sink in the boys’ bathroom.

Over the next two years, two hundred and forty people were involved in renovating 4th Street. We did use most of the wallboard in the renovation project and gave the extra sheets to a group in the community. I'm not sure exactly when the renovation was declared done. The school definitely looked different as a result of many weekends of work by so many people.

Renovating is a lot of work and staff time during the week was directed toward program activities like starting an employment project in the neighborhood. There wasn’t much work on the building going on during the week. The place had an urban camping feel for the first year. Guests slept on piles of wallboard for a while. Living spaces were created – some with black boards. The office in the attic had a great view of the south end of Manhattan that went on and on. It was a wonderful place to work. People from all walks of life came to meetings and training in the old school. The Loisaida Employment Project was launched.

Nearly twenty-five years later, the Lower East Side is now the “in” place to live for young urban professionals.
There is no formula for living as there is for breathing or for walking.

There are routines, habits, compulsions, distractions, obsessions that direct us, without the rhythm of pulse or the rhyme of reason, whither they will.

These non-Euclidean vectors veer off the page, beyond the limits of the equal sign, to planes unknown: the anti-logic of desire, contradiction, paradox.

"Love," we pray, "arrest us!" as we spin out of this orbit into frenzied chaos we dark stars of despair we black holes of longing imagination’s anti-matter incalculable calculus
Lori Stoltz

**Self-Portrait**

"There is poetry as soon as we realize that we possess nothing."
--John Cage

This summer, I touched the trunks of the tallest Redwood trees and became something uncertain.

I don’t even have a name for it.

When did this happen? Still, what I want is to touch what is untouched before it dies, before

I become certain again.
Lori Stoltz

*Thoughts of a Nude*

i twist and turn on a wooden stage
each Tuesday night, seven o’clock
five poses, two minutes each
longer pose must last until later
leaning against dramatic props
i am no more than still life
pale flesh against painted textures
pottery pieces and pinned backdrops
bent beam from the silver lamp
casts light and proper shadow
onto the propped subject

Nine artists wait
For perfect angle and medium
four men, five women
squinting, scanning every sag, scar, scream
of my scampish body under these lights
boneblack contrast and composition
on stretched canvases with crayons, acrylics,
charcoal pieces cracking like a spine
misaligned on the pine floor

nine o’clock pm
artists pack supplies inside
black buttoned sacks, my back
turning, i dress in a back room
walk downstairs, no
one, except the secretary
handing me my check,
recognizes me clothed, I know
I can go anywhere if I am
somebody else.
Olivia Frey

Dancing With Delores

Long before any of us girls at Homestead Junior High School started kissing or dancing with boys on a regular basis, we kissed and danced with each other. We usually practiced during slumber parties. We would warm up by reading the juicy sections of Grace Metalious’ *Peyton Place* into the tape recorder with an appropriately breathy voice, and then played the tape back while we giggled self consciously. Or we would tell stories about kids we knew in school who were already experimenting with sex. John Chase and Donna Everage. I always thought “cleavage” when I said her name. She was full breasted and small hipped, and she wore mini-skirts with hems three inches wide that she had sewn up herself. Every skirt she wore had a three inch hem. When she sat in the school desks, her skirts rose to mid-thigh, and a dark tunnel opened between her legs. Most of our teachers were women, but I wondered what a man might see standing in the front of the room. Did she know he could see?

Donna’s bra strap in back was also three inches wide. Her thin white blouses did not hide it, and boys still not quite sure what to do to get her attention would snap it. But Donna’s brassiere was flimsy armor. More than once she screamed out that her bra had come undone. Once a boy ripped her blouse, and she had to sit through class with her shoulder exposed. I had overheard Mrs. Trauger, a friend of my mother’s say one day that Donna was “white trash,” and she wouldn’t be surprised if Donna had her first baby before she even left Junior High.

John and Donna started dating when we were in seventh grade, and the stories about their nightly trysts flew fast and furious. They were thirteen and couldn’t drive, but John would walk to Donna’s house and pick her up each night, so the stories went, and they would walk to the stand of Florida pines near her house. John had already spread a blanket on the ground. They would have sex again and again, until, we whispered to each other, the blanket was wet with come. Oceans of come. Rivers of come, the sperm like tiny fish swimming upstream.
I knew that the stories must have been true when I saw John talking to Donna one day in art class. The Art, Industrial Design, and Home Ec classes were in one wing of the Junior High. The front wall of each class was a wall of glass, so that I could sit in Home Ec and watch John and Donna in their Design class. Donna was sitting on a chair, and John walked over to her and kneeled down to talk to her. One arm he placed around her shoulder, and with the other he gently stroked her arm as he talked. She looked down, and wouldn’t look up into his face. He kept talking, and as he talked he kneeled lower and looked up more earnestly into her face, while she kept looking down at her hands. I had never seen a boy and a girl together that way, so close and so familiar. Most of the boys I knew were like the boys who snapped Donna’s bra, still trying to figure out how to touch a girl, their experiments consisting mostly of pinches and jabs.

And we studied the tantalizing art of foreplay at slumber parties. We read and listened to *Peyton Place*, we watched movies—Elizabeth Taylor in “The Sandpiper” and “Butterfield Eight,” Sandra Dee in “Summer Place”—we watched the moves of our more experienced peers. But we knew there was no substitute for actually doing it.

During one slumber party at my house, we were all congregated in my bedroom listening to a record, when Dorothy Thomas asked if we had ever French kissed someone. None of us had, including Dorothy, but we all wondered what it felt like to have someone’s tongue in our mouths. It was supposed to be pretty sexy.

Dorothy was ready to try. I was ready, too. I was not particularly keen about kissing Dorothy, but my curiosity overcame my squeamishness, and I walked over to her with my lips puckered and my eyes closed. Dorothy roared with laughter. When you French kissed, she instructed, your mouths were open, not shut. And you held each other like this. Dorothy put her arms around me, and made me put my arms around her. I planted my open lips on her mouth, and she pushed her meaty, wet tongue into my mouth. First, I was shocked by how big her tongue felt. Second, I was shocked by how much I had liked it. My mind insisted that French kissing was a gross thing to do, just as I wasn’t yet convinced that a penis in a vagina would be pleasurable. Yet my body—in this case my mouth—had
liked that warmth, though it occurred to me that I might want to kiss someone other than Dorothy Thomas.

After everyone had kissed Dorothy, some of the girls more enthusiastically than others, we decided that we needed to practice slow dancing. Not that we didn’t know how to waltz, and most of us had danced with boys at Cotillion. We knew about leading and following, and the steps. What we need to practice was snuggling while we danced. By now we had gone to some of the Junior High dances, and we had watched the ninth graders dance. They danced much closer together, and let some of their body parts touch that we knew probably shouldn’t be touching, or at least that the teachers and parents wouldn’t want touching. When I danced at Cotillion with John Campbell, we carefully held each other at arm’s length.

As she had with the kissing, Dorothy initiated the dancing. She wanted to dance with me, but I had had enough of Dorothy for one night. Instead, I asked Dolores Angelino if she wanted to try it. She smiled at me shyly, but walked over to me, and we put our arms around each other. She was a little shorter than I was, and after a second or two, she turned her head and rested it on my shoulder. Her hair tickled my cheek, and she smelled clean, like soap.

Dolores was a shy, gentle girl, an unlikely member of our crowd. She wasn’t an ‘A’ student, like me, or a smart trouble-maker like Dorothy. We were all confident about something—I made good grades and was frequently teacher’s pet, Jane and Mary’s parents were teachers and seemed to be immune from the discipline that our other teachers meted out to everyone else. Dorothy’s father was a respected lawyer in town, and rich. I didn’t know who Dolores’ parents were. They were Italian, yet unrelated to the Accursios, well-known and wealthy Italians who owned Capri Restaurant in Florida City.

But Dolores was beautiful and sweet, and her personality was uncomplicated. She liked being with us, and we didn’t mind because she was so easy to be around. The way she danced with me was the way she lived—light in my arms, and she easily responded to my subtle turns as we danced.

As the song played on, I became aware of how much I liked holding her. That is, I liked holding Dolores. I liked feeling Dorothy’s tongue in my mouth, but overall the act of kissing her was not too
pleasant. This, on the other hand, felt wonderful. Dolores was soft and relaxed in my arms, she smelled clean. I could feel her breasts against my chest, soft mounds of flesh. Her back was warm where the palm of my hand rested.

The music stopped, and for one brief, extraordinary moment, Dolores stayed in my arms, and only then, after the others had pulled away from each other, did she hesitantly break the embrace. She looked up at me and smiled shyly, and that was it. She went back to my bed and sat down, and didn’t look at me.

Dorothy was getting restless.

“This is dumb. I don’t see what’s so great about that. Boring! I’d rather fast dance.” We decided to make brownies, or, I should say, Dorothy decided to make brownies, and so that was the end of our experiments that night.

I didn’t think too much about Dolores in the next few weeks, until the day that I found out that she had started “going out” with Randy McMichael. Randy was our age, but his energetic involvement in baseball, basketball, and football as he grew up must have speeded his entry into adolescence. He had black hair and dark brown eyes, and he was the hairiest boy I knew. He had thick black hair under his arms—obvious when he raised his arms for a jump shot on the basketball court. His muscles were hard and they pulsed under his skin. He must have started shaving when he was in sixth grade, because his cheeks and chin were stubbly and slightly blue by the end of the afternoon. Randy’s brother was the quarterback on the South Dade High School team, and everyone assumed—correctly, it turned out—that Randy would take over as quarterback when his brother left.

One day I saw them walking down the hall together. Dolores held her books to her chest, while Randy walked with his hand resting casually on her shoulder, and I remembered the night that I had danced with Dolores. I could feel her warm back again. I remembered how her hair and skin had smelled, and remembered the light pressure of her breasts against my chest. Randy was two heads taller than Dolores, his arms twice the size of hers. I couldn’t imagine that he could hold her gently, even if he tried. In movies I had watched a man crush another man’s skull by accident with just one punch, because he had not fully understood his strength and the
force of his blow. It would be like that with Randy and Dolores. He was used to knocking other boys down, crashing into them with his body. What would happen if he were to push his body against Dolores? He would crush her, break her bones, at the very least bruise her tenderness.

The two of them stopped by Dolores’ locker and she leaned her back against the wall, still holding her books against her chest, I thought in a protective way. Randy put his hand on the wall above her and leaned toward her, looking down at her. Her eyes were down. Like with John and Donna, Randy was talking and Dolores listened with her head down. She looked sad, I thought, and he looked urgent.

What was it that a boy and a girl talked about at those moments, I wondered? Was it an apology and a desperate explanation? Were these boys trying to talk the girls into something that they didn’t want to do? Were the boys reassuring the girls about something? Had they been caught, and they were explaining themselves? Were they telling “their side” of the story?

If I, instead of Randy, stood next to Dolores and talked to her, how would it be different? Our shoulders would touch, and though she was an inch or so shorter than I, we would look each other in the eyes. Sometimes our foreheads might touch, or we would nudge each other with our arms. We would whisper to each other so that I could feel her breath on my cheek. I would not tower over her or look down on her, or crush her small body with mine.

The longer I stood there looking at them—casually, hoping no one noticed I was looking at them, they would think I had a crush on Randy and was jealous of Dolores—the more I wanted to walk over and push Randy out of the way. I just knew that he was hurting her, or was about to hurt her in some irrecoverable way. I did not know then that I loved her. It was something that in 1964 in Homestead, Florida there were no words for. It was a feeling that had no home in my body, no space in my mind. Love in that small southern town where I lived was a simple thing, unambiguous. A boy loved a girl, a girl loved a boy; girls had girlfriends, and boys had buddies. There was a line we didn’t cross, like the scores of other lines—race, class, religion—that none of us crossed, that we believed would be death to cross. But for a girl to love a girl, to want to touch her; for a boy to
love a boy, to want to touch him, there wasn’t even a line that had been drawn, or a name, and so there was no fear or fight. Only blankness, a shadow. You think you see some movement out of the corner of your eye, but you turn, and nothing is there.

Dolores and Randy eventually broke up—I had heard that she had broken up with him—and then she started dating Michael McGeary, who was also a baseball and basketball star, who was also dark like Randy, and mature, but at least not as hairy as Randy. Once Dolores started having boyfriends, she stopped hanging out with us girls. One by one, we each started dating—except for Dorothy, who, while she didn’t graduate to petting and sex, next started smoking and drinking—and so we didn’t need the slumber party sessions anymore. We found out first-hand what French kissing a boy was like, and close dancing. Some part of me knew that none of the boys felt like Dolores when I danced with them, and I missed her.