

Memoir Excerpts

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A Love Story by Muriel Hartranft

Saturday football games were a big event during the fall months. The last game of the season was always Indiana-Purdue. As I got to know Art better, I told him about Alberto but said I hadn't dated him for about a year. Well, much to my surprise, Alberto called out of the blue and asked me to go with him to the game. And still having a soft spot in my heart for him, I accepted. When I told Art, he was one unhappy young man. He essentially said that if I went out with Alberto, then he was out of here.

When the Saturday for Indiana-Purdue finally arrived, Alberto came to take me to the game and Art was standing in the background. Alberto walked up to me and gave me a big hug, then said, "Come on, let's get going."

But I hesitated and said, "Sorry, I have made other plans."

And with that statement, I chose to make my life with Arthur E. Rowe.

--Muriel Hartranft, 90, and Art were married for 28 years. She will self-publish her memoir later this year. This and the other memoirs excerpted here are by former students of author Joe Kita's.

Our Dog Toni by Westra Ingalls

Toni's favorite game was golf. Every day about 5 o'clock, Charles would put a tee in the ground and Toni would put the golf ball on the tee. If it fell off, he would keep putting it on until he got it right. His tail never stopped wagging. Charles hit the ball with an iron, and Toni would chase after it when it left the tee. One time Charles didn't gauge it right, and he hit Toni across the side of his mouth with the iron. Toni dropped and passed out. Charles got excited and yelled, "Westra, I've killed Toni!" "I grabbed the hose and turned on the water. The cold water brought him out of it, and he jumped up and teed the ball like nothing had happened. We were amazed.

--Westra Ingalls, 93, typed all 24 chapters of her 100-page memoir, printed it at Staples, and distributed copies to her family. "They all told me they couldn't put it down," she said.

If the Boot Fits, Wear It by Trish Sinclair

It was the first snow of winter—an exciting day for every child but not for most teachers. Up until now, I had been able to dress myself for recess, but today I would need some help. Miss Finlayson, my kindergarten teacher at Princess Elizabeth School near Hamilton, Ontario, had been through first snow days many times in her long career, but I think she may still remember this one.

I managed to get into my itchy wool snow pants. But I struggled with my jacket because it didn't fit well. It was a hand-me-down from my brother, and it made me wonder why I had to wear his ugly clothes. At least my hat and matching scarf were mine, and they were quite pretty. Finally it was time to have Miss Finlayson help me with my boots. In her calm, motherly voice she said, "By the end of winter, you will all be able to put on your own boots. "I didn't realize at the time that this was more a statement of hope than of confidence.

I handed her my boots and stuck out my foot. Like most children, I expected the adult to do all the work. After much wiggling and pushing, she managed to get the first one into place and then, with an audible sigh, worked the second one on too.

I announced, "They're on the wrong feet. "With the grace that only experience can bring, she struggled to get the boots off and went through the joyless task of putting them on again. Then I said, "These aren't my boots, you know. "As she pulled the offending boots from my feet, she still managed to look both helpful and interested. Once they were off, I said, "They're my brother's boots. My mother makes me wear them, and I hate them! "Somehow, from long years of practice, she managed to act as though I wasn't an annoying little girl. She pushed and shoved, less gently this time, and the boots were returned to their proper place on my feet. With a great sigh of relief, seeing the end of her struggle with me, she asked, "Now, where are your mittens?"

I looked into her eyes and said, "I didn't want to lose them, so I stuffed them into the toes of my boots."

--Canadian Trish Sinclair recently self-published a collection of her life stories.

Last Conversation with Dad by Joyce Rankin

"Okay dad, start from the beginning."

I never really knew my father, or rather never took the time to ask him about the details of his life. His life had always been focused on mine. It was always about me. But isn't that the way it's supposed to be? I mean, I was his daughter. Spoiled? Yes. Deservedly so? Of course.

But now that he's approaching 80, I'm feeling it's finally time to put the focus on him. My plan is to ask him some questions about his life and write down everything he says. It's not that I'm afraid of his dying. At 78 I can see him living for at least another 10 years. Except for his back problems, he's doing fine. It's just that it's time to put the pieces together to understand him better and, in the process, perhaps understand myself a little better, too.

So that day, across that little Formica table, we finally began to talk....

—Joyce Rankin, 61, is a retired school principal who lives in Carbondale, Colorado

Jackie's Jewel by David Scherer

Jackie is arguably the grumpiest koala at the Featherdale Wildlife Park in the Adelaide Hills of southern Australia. All the koalas there are grumpy. You would be too if you were nocturnal and someone kept waking you up all day while you were trying to sleep it off. That's right – sleep it off. The average koala is perpetually intoxicated from gorging on eucalyptus leaves, which ferment almost immediately in its tummy.

The reason Jackie and her buddies are repeatedly roused from their enhanced slumbers is so they can be hugged and photographed by tourists, who make the pilgrimage to Featherdale and an increasing number of other preserves for just that transfiguring experience. Whatever department in the Aussie government oversees such things is now moving to outlaw the practice, which is understandable. How would you react, mate, if you were trying to sleep off a dozen Fosters and some round, furry creature reeking of eucalyptus kept waking and mauling you?

—*David Scherer's collection of travel stories, Ramblin' in Paradise, will be self-published this year*

Son by Georgina Areia

I back the Mercedes SUV out of the garage and click the garage-door opener. The door slowly descends. I notice that the oaks and maples are tinged with specks of gold, orange and yellow as summer fades into fall. Our white colonial home with its blue shutters and green lawn sloping down to the trees and stream appears calm and peaceful. The foundation plants are neatly trimmed. But there are no flowers in my garden this time of year. It's a beautiful September morning, the sky clear and the temperature still in the 70s. But a storm rages in my stomach and thoughts race around in my head as I search for an explanation for the nightmare that has become our lives. The house is filled with angst and a riot of emotions. Michael, my handsome, brilliant, talented 30-year-old son sits slumped in silence beside me, now overweight as a result of his medication, depression and compulsive eating. Where he used to be lively and talkative he is emotionally flat and unexpressive. His olive complexion is sallow, and there are large dark circles around his empty brown eyes.

Jesus, how did this happen?

—*Georgina Areia is a pen name for a mother still struggling to come to grips with what happened to her son. Her memoir, of which this is the first chapter, is helping her do that.*

Mum – The Last Word by Ernie Jackson

After what seemed too short a time I accepted there was nothing else I could do at the hospital, so we took the short, somber, drive to where mum lived. It was a small apartment in a block of about 40 at an assisted-living complex. The age of most of the occupants indicated that no one would be living here very long.

Even so, on the short walk from the car to her plain blue front door, we were approached by two separate elderly neighbors who inquired how Irene was and when she'd be coming home. Although our demeanor probably indicated the hopelessness of the situation, I replied as optimistically as I could.

Mum's tiny apartment was on the ground floor and, as we entered, the smell of her perfume were prevalent, but the warm greeting we had always enjoyed was, of course, not there. It was slightly musty so we drew the curtains and opened the window, and it was soon as fresh as ever. The designs and colors of the curtains complimented the small lounge suite, and the whole place was snug and comfortable, as it had always been. A small wall clock ticked away, seemingly louder than ever in this timeless space. Many family photos were displayed on her sideboard, with her grandkids and me taking pride of place. Who would cherish these photos now? I thought.

Since we had to prepare for the inevitable, I searched through her personal papers and documents in the drawers of the highly polished bureau. Eventually, I came across a full obituary that my mother had prepared for this sad day. Among other items, she had listed all the mourners she wanted at her funeral and the last two lines said this:

“And if my son Ernie can find the time to come off the golf course, I would like him to come, too.”

And I smiled.

—Ernie Jackson was a British bobby for 27 years and never wrote anything more than a police report. At age 73, he wrote and self-published his life story, “Ernie Who...?” Meet him www.erniewho.com.

The Seed of My Soul by Pat Laster

September 1, 1939. I went to school as usual, then was sent home to gather my two younger brothers and say goodbye to our parents, as war seemed inevitable. Chamberlain had returned from Germany after meeting Hitler, and the news was not good. My dear mother made me promise to take care of my brothers, aged 10 and 12. We all went to the railroad station and said goodbye, not knowing whether we would ever see our parents again. There were lots of tears and fears. We were not told where we would be going. All the children were crying and scared. War had not been declared yet and, of course, we were all hoping that peace would win out.

We were allowed to bring one little knapsack apiece containing our clothes, gas mask and rations. We were called the London Evacuees, and we were a poor sad lot.

--Pat Laster, 83, teaches yoga in Atlanta and on board Crystal Cruises. Despite a long life of introspection and meditation, she had never realized where her life's calling originated until she wrote this.