

String

16K words

By David Griffin

I spent the last ten minutes in pain as I made my way from my bed down the hall and across the living room floor into the kitchen on my hands and knees. I was lucky to have been able to get my body up that far off the floor. When it first came upon me the other day I had to inch myself along on one hip and then the other so I could get to the bathroom. That was quite a scene, my girlish niceties long since vanished. At 78, I'm not worried about retrieving them. But I've been steadily getting better since then. By tomorrow I need to stand on my own two legs or suffer the consequences.

Tomorrow morning a van will come and take me to Mrs. Lampfer's Home. It's a "custodial care" place away from the shore and out in the country where they're happy to have you if you sign over your Social Security check and promise not to poop your pants. It's not a residence for those who can't somehow get around on their own. Mrs. Lampfer won't be picky about the condition of my mind or whether I can still play tennis. But if I can't walk just a little or have problems using the bathroom, I'll be shipped off to a nursing home for a higher level of care. I do not want to go to a nursing home just yet, my Dear God.

From the kitchen, I brought a pad of paper in one hand and a pen held between my teeth. Given this style of travel along the floor, with a dog's view of the furniture, it's a long way to the living room. With great effort, I managed to pull my old body up into my easy chair.

The pen and paper are for me to write down my story. I'll spend all day on it, while I still have control of most everything around me, and before I'm given medications which could leave me listless or worse. I was never going to put my life on paper, preferring to keep it to myself. But when I crawled out of bed this morning it occurred to me that soon I will be no one, just the patient down the hall, an old woman finishing out her days.

When my husband Bill's father lay in a nursing home many years ago, we bought a large picture frame and hung it on the wall over his bed. We filled it with photos of Dad as a younger man fishing with the kids, riding his motorcycle, getting an award at work, swimming at the beach ... all to remind any visitor or staff that the old man lying before them, connected to a multitude of wires and tubes, was in his soul a vibrant, active man of responsibility and accomplishment. He should be treated accordingly.

I no longer have photos of myself. And probably no one will ever read my story. But I'm going to write it anyway. Maybe it's me who needs to be reminded that I walked an ordinary path, but I walked it as well as I could. It seemed to take so long for me to gain any insight into life, but that began to change over the last decade. And like any change it was not easy.

Ten years ago in the middle of a Lake Michigan snowstorm my husband Bill stumbled in the back door, chased by snow and a gust of wind that he swore had charged across the frozen landscape aiming just for him.

"Let's get out of here," he said. "I just pushed that damned snow blower up and down a hundred feet of driveway while I was thinking, 'what the hell are two old folks like us doing here fighting the snow and ice? Let's move south.'" He stood in the kitchen with the slush melting off his boots and a determined look on his face, with a half smile like the night years before when he decided to make the gamble of a lifetime and open his own hardware store. It paid off. The business provided a good living to us for over three decades. Before his epiphany of moving south, Bill retired and sold the store, with never a mention of moving anywhere, certainly not so far away.

“Would you really pick up everything and move?” I asked.

He sat down at the table and began to remove his boots without unlacing them. One foot held the other on the floor and he pulled like a bear trying to get out of an ankle trap.

“I think I would, Margaret” he said. “But I wouldn’t ‘pick up’ anything, not much. I’d sell everything; pack what’s left in the truck and leave.”

“Just like that?” I said.

“If a tornado hit us, that’s what we’d do.”

The sheer audacity of moving anywhere at that time in our life jarred my senses. As we watched television that night, I must have turned the sound down with the remote ten times and looked over his way.

“Really? You’d really leave here?”

He shook his head yes.

“What about Sarah,” I asked, bringing up our only child, married and living across town.

Bill smiled. He knew I was trying to be motherly. “When was the last time she needed us?”

“We’re her parents, Bill,” I said, even though most of the time it didn’t feel like it.

“I know that,” he said. “But you know what I mean.”

“She’s an independent woman,” I said, trying to ennoble a situation fraught with hurt and bad feelings I wished I didn’t have.

“That she is,” he said. “And she has her husband.”

I didn’t say anything.

“And the ladies at the insurance agency,” he continued.

“Yes,” I said, “a life of work and play, whichever is which.”

Bill snorted. “But anyway, it’s time to leave Ludington.”

“What does that mean? ‘It’s time.’” I said.

“Look,” he said, “it’s a lot of things. We don’t need all the space we have in this big old place. We sure don’t need this northern weather. Retirement’s

turning out to be more expensive than we thought. It means ... I don't know ...” His hands rose in the air and then dropped in his lap. He was quiet for a moment. “It means that it's time,” he said. “And I'm going to bed.”

Bill got up from his chair. I noticed he did so with some effort. We were getting older, but at that early stage when we still thought we could do all the chores around the house. Until we tried to do too many in one day.

Fifteen minutes later I lay beside my husband listening to him snore. He could sleep through a bomb falling on the house, and he had just dropped one. If Bill ever faces the electric chair, I'll be the only one not surprised when he sleeps like a baby the night before his execution.

I could get enthusiastic about moving south, but it was a shock just to think about it. My mind turned the pros and cons over and over. Beside myself with indecision, I listened as the storm strengthened and the wind howled through the eaves, like ghosts sent to dance on the roof. I dozed and soon the line of reality wavered and sank below the surface into a dream. The kind of dream where you know you're dreaming, but it's real anyway, even when it's about ghosts.

I've had my share of fears in life, but I've never been afraid of ghosts. Even as a child, the idea of someone hanging around after death seemed absurd. I'd want to get going on whatever came next. And if ghostly beings wanted to visit, that was OK, but I can't believe they would throw plates around the kitchen or make weird noises. So when I fell asleep and the howlings outside on the eaves marched right down the side of the house through my window and lined up at the foot of my bed, I was more interested than alarmed. They seemed like such a nice foursome of young men, dressed up as a Barbershop Quartet with striped shirts, straw hats and garters above the elbows. They didn't look like ghosts. They hadn't bothered to throw white sheets over their heads. But I knew they were ghosts, just as we know anything or anyone in a dream is what we think it is.

They sang to me while Bill slept soundly at my side, probably dreaming the governor had stayed his execution. Most of the songs were about me, and surprisingly about my courage and strength as a woman. It was like waking up in

a casket and hearing me eulogized by four strangers. A few songs were about others. I suppose they were meant to be examples drawn for my benefit. In one, a sailor onboard an old ship longed for home and his sweetheart. I hadn't longed for Bill in many years since we were never apart. I wondered how I would feel at my age, if separated from him. I knew we would be, eventually, but I never wanted to think about it. I seldom remembered we would not live forever.

When morning came and the storm let up, the little band sang a final number, put away their tuning fork and took a bow on the stage of my imagination. As I awoke, I immediately remembered the dream and presumed my subconscious had sent the little troupe to advise my conscious mind, but I was unsure what the advice was meant to be.

Of course, the ghosts might be real. I'm serious. I try to remain open to everything. They might have represented the families who lived in this old house over the past 150 years, men and women and children who were probably bored to tears from an isolated farm life of the 1800s. The center of town lay in a village fifteen miles away, but a hundred years ago it may as well have been on the moon. Their farm was no more than a bump on the landscape of fields and woods and streams and not much else, where nothing exciting ever happened beyond an occasional marriage and a lot of births to ensure enough field hands in the years to come. Life for Bill and I was certainly more comfortable and interesting than for those who lived in the house a century ago, but anyone risked a type of deadening from staying somewhere too long. Maybe the ghosts showed up to cheer on later occupants of the house who needed encouragement to leave. Suddenly, I remembered the tenor of the Barbershop Quartet who had taken the lead in singing a famous lyric from years ago, "See The Pyramids Along the Nile ...' As the quartet left, he stopped and turned to me on his way to the window. In his hand he held a ball of string about the size of an orange. And just before he turned and leapt out the window, he tossed the ball to me. I didn't remember if I caught it or not. That would take a while.

I had not always been the staid wife of a Midwest businessman, not in my soul. I like to say that before I was a Methodist, I was a Buddhist. But honestly, I was just the teenage daughter of a war widow who was interested in various religions. Using a pop-up tent, I set up a kind of Zendo in my backyard. My dog loved the little hut with the fat Buddha statue I bought for a dollar at the Army Navy Store downtown. I carried saltine crackers and butter out from the kitchen and ate them in my Zendo. Spreading butter on the Buddha's belly, I sat back and laughed as the dog licked it off with gusto. I spent one night out there in the tent after an evening of talking my mother into allowing it. I was losing the argument, but I kept it up, interrupted only when she took a phone call, I thought probably from a neighbor.

“All right,” she said as she hung up the phone, “but I want you to be careful out there.”

The moon came up full and bright, as bright as day, I told her. Not to worry.

But later in the thin tent in my pajamas, I felt vulnerable. The piercing moonlight felt like it was exposing me. After a while, I dropped off to sleep. I was fourteen years old and probably had more hormones in my head than brains, but soon I came awake and thought I'd heard a man's voice coming through the yard. I was sure I hadn't dreamed it. I wanted to run in the house, but stood my ground in the little tent. I'd made such a stink to my mother and was “practically a grown woman.” I really didn't want to explain I'd heard someone in the yard who probably wasn't there.

Algernon, my dog, was still asleep. I kept telling myself he surely would be awake if his sensitive ears had picked up the slightest sound out of the ordinary. He lay at my feet, just like he did on the bed up in my room. I prodded him with my foot, but he only growled and didn't pick his head up. It was summertime and we kept a water dish for Al outside on the step up to the enclosed back porch. Someone who planned to do me harm could have easily put something in the dog's water to knock him out for the night. I knew I was thinking crazy, and finally I worked myself up to a point near hysteria. I bolted

out of the tent, ran to the back door and practically yanked my arm out my shoulder socket when the heavy screen door didn't budge. It was locked.

A blood curdling scream erupted from deep inside me, scaring the dog as he barked excitedly from behind me.. I pounded on the door and yelled for my mother. Why the hell did she lock me out? I'd be raped, killed, maybe drawn and quartered in my own back yard. Mommy, Mommy, why did you do this to me? I pounded harder on the door. My hands were bleeding. I tried to rip the screen out of the door. Algernon was barking madly and although I did not want to turn around and look, I was sure the Cocker Spaniel was holding off the biggest, baddest man in the neighborhood, Mr. Filbert. The very man who had said mean things to me years before and stolen my chalk when he caught Sally Thomas and I playing hopscotch on his front sidewalk.

Frantically, I slammed my head into the screen. It folded in on itself and flew inside the porch. I reached in and grabbed the knob, but it wouldn't turn because it was locked. My fingers jabbed underneath to find the little locking button. A larger hand grabbed my wrist. I had no breath left to scream. I couldn't shake off the iron hand that held my wrist. I wet myself.

"Margaret, Margaret, stop it, stop it," my mother shouted. But in my state of now full hysteria, I marveled at how Mr. Filbert was able to disguise his voice and sound just like my mother.

A slap full across the face stunned me. The porch lights came on. I stood outside the door in a puddle. My mother stood inside the still locked door. Behind her was Mr. Filbert in pajamas, covered by a robe.

"Step back, Margaret," said my mother, "so I can open the door."

I heard the little slide click and the door pushed against me. I stepped back. I was close to hyper ventilating, but my eyes never left Mr. Filbert. I could not for the life of me explain his presence to myself.

Mother opened the door fully and dragged me inside the porch. She tried to pull me to her bosom, but I quickly stepped away, my stare fixed on the man who hated hopscotch.

”Darling,” said my Mother, “Mr. Filbert came over to borrow some coffee for morning. Oh dear, it must be later than we thought.” Her little “darling” was standing there reeking of piss, hands bloody and body still shaking. Social explanations definitely seemed out of place.

“I’ll be going,” he said. The big man quickly stepped past me through the door and went down the steps.

“Well, you’ve had a little scare,” said my mother. “And you’re probably confused about things. So why don’t we just go to bed now, get our rest and talk in the morning.”

I struggled up to my room, still mute. We didn’t talk about it in the morning. Neither of us ever brought it up. Even in later years we never spoke of that night.

I lay on my bed trembling until morning, adrift in a sea of loneliness. I had never met my father, and now I no longer had a mother. I lived with a woman I had deeply loved. She was my entire world when I was younger. But now I understood why she didn’t seem to have time for me lately, never wanted to attend my girl scout activities, avoided PTA meetings as if they were punitive measures and refused to kiss me at bedtime beginning a few months ago.

How a fourteen year old only child with little understanding of humanity could ever ferret out an answer to the question that kept coming to me I don’t know. Why? I sat upright and then lay down and then sat up again, at first refusing to believe it.

But I knew I had hit the nail square on the head. She no longer wanted me. She wanted to get on with her life. Mother probably believed she’d done her duty and it was time for me to make myself scarce while she found another love to replace my father. For three more years we would carefully dance at arm’s length through a mother-daughter relationship before I went off to college. I needed a mother but instead got a caretaker. After I left for the University we seldom spoke. For years our communications consisted only of holiday cards. In

her last years she finally found some contentment and I guess that freed her up to remember she had a daughter who loved her.

That fall I entered ninth grade and took down the Zendo. I really don't know what happened to my Buddha. My mother sold the house and moved to Florida when I was in college. Perhaps she sold the little statue at a garage sale.

In high school, I was still interested in eastern religions. The winter after my night in the Zendo I wore prayer ribbons and sandals. My teachers were scandalized and so was my mother. The only adult who seemed to understand was our Pastor. He encouraged me to explore the spiritual side of my life and to look for what he called "the string" that was hanging somewhere just for me.

Pastor John told me that when he was a little boy he couldn't do the things his older brothers easily accomplished. They excelled at sports and any test of strength. When the family went to the Midway, a kind of permanent carnival at the edge of town, the two older boys spent their nickels throwing baseballs at stacked replicas of milk bottles in order to win a prize. The oldest brother was even allowed to fire a pump action .22 caliber rifle in a similar test of skill.

"I was too young for that stuff," he said as we sat on the steps of the church hall one summer afternoon when I was fifteen. The heat shimmered above the cemetery across the street and gave the headstones a damp look. The cicadas were so loud you wanted to tell them to knock it off because you were well aware of how hot it was.

"So my Mom left my brothers with Dad and walked me down to the other end of the Midway to Mrs. Ozawa's little booth. I was embarrassed she had to find a special place for me, but I was young enough to quickly get over it."

Pastor John said the Japanese woman had set up a child's game where anyone who could pull on a string would win a prize, usually a very inexpensive bauble or plastic cowboy figure. She sat behind a counter on which more than a hundred closely spaced strings were attached to little eyelets screwed into the wood. All

of the strings ran straight up toward the ceiling for about five feet and then bent under the roof and shot off at various angles toward the back of the booth.

“When I looked up, all the strings were drawn through a large circular loop of wood, like the top of a huge bird cage,” he said.

I saw the ceiling of strings in my mind’s eye. So did Pastor John. His face changed to that of a boy’s.

“Every one of those strings went through the ring and across the ceiling to the back. Then each of them dropped down to a prize,” he said.

“What kind of prizes?” I said.

“Mostly cheap stuff, little plastic toy soldiers, some noisemakers, a gold colored pen. Of course there were a few really nice prizes, for a kid anyway. I saw the one I wanted right away. A cap pistol.”

“You mean like a toy gun?” I said.

“Exactly. Silver. And it came with rolls of paper caps in a box lying right next to the gun. I can still see that pistol, silver and shiny, brand new. Before I chose a string to pull, I prayed.”

“You asked God for a cap pistol?” I said, laughing.

“Psalm 18, verse 2,;” he said. “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and ‘ ... my gun dealer, I guess,” and he laughed.

“Did your mother know you wanted the gun?”

“Are you kidding?” he said. “She was a staunch church woman, a Methodist of the Midwest variety, a Prohibitionist. She was against everything. I would have never even dared ask her if I could have a cap pistol. But I figured if I won it, she wouldn’t give it back. I hoped.”

“Did you win it? Did you pull the right string?” I said.

“I gave Mrs. Ozawa my nickel and I pulled a string,” he said. “Ten feet away on the table a statue of the Catholic Blessed Mother rose up as if we were to have a private apparition. I heard Mom gasp. She started to say something like, ‘Well, I don’t think this is a good idea ...’ but Mrs. Ozawa was fast on her feet. Her

livelihood depended upon repeat business. She jumped up from her chair and blocking my view she grabbed something on the table.”

“She switched strings,” I said

“Nothing that complicated, probably,” he said. “But when she turned back to us she handed me a toy police badge. It was neat, but it wasn’t a cap gun. In a circle around an eagle on the badge were the words, “State of Grace.”

I laughed. This was the man from up in the pulpit who told us about Jesus and the prophets and who usually seemed stuffy when I spoke to him in church. He was a normal man after all, who had been a regular boy

“Did your mother ever bring you back?” I asked.

“Yes, a few times. On our last visit, I pulled on a string and won a little felt pennant that read, ‘Let’s Get Smashed!’” Even Mrs. Ozawa was surprised to find that on the prize table.”

It was almost time to go back inside to the Vacation Bible School. Pastor John had been looking off in the middle distance as he told his story, but now he turned to me and put his soda bottle down on the steps.

“I think we each have a string waiting for us somewhere, Margaret,” he said, “and we’ll always win something in life. You never know what you’ll get. You’ll come across lots of strings, but the string waiting for you is especially yours. It may not be what you’re hoping for, but when you pull on it you’ll know it’s the right one. It’ll show you your purpose. It may be a career that matches every one of your abilities. It may be your art.”

“I’m not an artist,” I said.

“Everyone has their art,” he said. “It’s what makes you feel good, not what makes you famous. I made pot holders as a kid. It embarrassed my father, but I loved doing it, the repetitiveness of weaving. Or your string might be a place. You could go somewhere and immediately feel like you would be just as happy to be turned into a tree and planted there so you’re a part of that world.”

“How do I know if I see a string?” I said.

“If it’s an opportunity, then it’s gotta be some kind of string,” he said. “You should look at the world that way, even before you go off to college.”

“But I wouldn’t know which to choose,” I said.

“You may have to pull on a few. But when you think you’ve got the right one, you pull on it, Margaret. You pull on that string with all your might. And wouldn’t you think if it was your special string, it would pull back? It will. It’ll pull you down your path. All the way to heaven.”

For the rest of the summer, I looked for strings, wondering if every opportunity to do something different might hold a future career in its hands. By fall I realized that strings probably didn’t drop down in front of us every day. Not the kind that herald careers, anyway. But little strings of opportunity are always dropping all around us.

For Pastor John, the string of being a Pastor didn’t pull him all the way to heaven. He moved to another town the next year and after I married I heard he left the ministry to become a teacher. He would have been a good one. I hope he pulled and pulled on that one.

I thought Bill was my string when I first met him. Today I believe he was there to help me find it. Tall and strong and manly. And yet quiet, with a sense of humor.

When Bill and I were newlyweds we didn’t have much. We didn’t care. We had each other. On summer weekends we took his old motorbike down to the river on Saturday nights if the weather was good and the moon was full. We packed a blanket and a thin muslin tent without a floor. They kept the cool night air off us and neatly fit on the back frame of the bike. When it got dark Bill and I stripped and swam in the river. Our little game was for one of us to give the other a head start. When we found each other we ran around in the moonlight doing what you’d expect of a healthy young couple. Later we would fall exhausted onto the blanket inside the tent and sleep till morning, when we got up and did it all over again.

One Saturday night about two hours after we fell asleep in the little tent I awoke and looked around. The muslin material was completely aglow, as if a film crew had shown up outside and turned on a thousand watt light. I peeked out the flap just to make sure we were alone. The ripples in the water where we had camped at the river bend were bubbling like little white fires in the bright moonlight. Naked, I stepped outside. I felt bold. Only a couple of hours before, I had been rather aggressive according to Bill, who had made the comment and then hastened to add he was not complaining. I moved away from the tent. If someone was out there behind a tree with a camera, I thought, go ahead and roll the film. I hummed a few bars from Janis Joplin's "Get It While You Can."

"Have a good look at *this*," I said, surprised to hear my own voice. No one answered. I was alone. How different I felt as a woman compared to the night in my back yard when I became hysterical. I was probably no more than ten pounds heavier and I don't think I was any stronger, but I was a woman, in my mind a far cry from a girl. Of course, Bill was with me now.

I stood in the clearing a few feet from our camp site. The moon's light was so strong I could see every dimple on my body, each goose pimple on my skin. It felt like the moon was probing each part of me. I stepped to the river and lay down at its edge in the shallows and let the Moon wash over my body, to stir me with its strong, gentle light, slowly and lovingly. I was in the arms of a lover who had cherished the earth and its creatures since the world began. I had no idea if I was touched by an aspect of the God I believed in or the devil I didn't. I was caressed by Nature ... physical, palpable and present. A half hour later I returned to the tent after one of the most erotic encounters of my life. But there was something else. I was in love with the universe and Nature, at peace with it and a part of it. I felt stronger than ever before and full of a sense of purpose, though I could not define it. I had been somehow baptized and confirmed a woman by the scheme God invented to give me life, which was infinitely deeper than the simple biology that produced my body. I was now fully here. I was present. I had only to find my string.

I've often thought that I never told that story to my daughter. Not just because I would embarrass both of us, but more so because I didn't think she would understand. She's such a no-nonsense girl and has always been so practical. She would never think to listen for that still small voice. In high school her art teacher wrote on one of her class exercises, "Sarah, you need to find your art and let it out." She never did.

Sarah and her husband were uptight perfectionists. They took everything so seriously. She would not have understood how her father and I just wanted to be together when we were young, whether or not everything was in order. Bill and I would have lived in a hovel just to be together. Sarah and William didn't get married until they could afford a dream house. Today they buy cars they believe they deserve that cost more than their educations.

I again thought I found my string the first time I heard Janis Joplin's music. It wasn't so much the lyrics or her rough textured voice, but the energy blasting out from her stunned me with each song I played over and over from her "Cheap Thrills" album.

Her choice of soul songs and the way she sang them with passion ignited a fire in me. I was captured by her originality and wanted to burn down everything I had ever been told since puberty so that I might rebuild the world with my own experience. If I'd gone farther down that road I would have turned dangerous, but that's the way I liked feeling in my twenties. Janis was authentic and had found her own string. I wanted to be the Michigan housewife version of Joplin (before she died of a drug overdose,) the I-don't-give-damn chick in the neighborhood. I could be heard croaking out her version of "Summertime" while hanging wash on the line in the backyard.

The more up-to-date radio stations across Lake Michigan played Joplin constantly, but in Ludington she was seldom heard. Our local station carved a place in the hearts of listeners with songs by Jerry Vale and Tony Bennett. For

some reason they played Joplin's "Take Another Little Piece of My Heart" one afternoon in August. Their switch board lit up like a Christmas tree as they were flooded with ill mannered suggestions of what to do with the record. They spent the rest of the day apologizing for their blunder.

What Joplin's music meant for me was unclear. Rather than a roadmap for my future, this would be a string of pure emotion and not an intellectual proposition. In any case, I needed to pull on it and investigate. Joplin and Peace and Love and Music seemed so important to me that summer of 1969. A young wife, I informed my husband I was going to Woodstock, but I'd be back in 3 or 4 days. He almost divorced me. It was the only time in our marriage I remember Bill speaking to me harshly.

"Here I am trying to impress the bank with my solid citizenship," he yelled at me, "so they'll loan me money for a store, and you're walking around all week wearing beads and telling everyone you're going to Woodstock for three days of peace and love?"

"But Bill, I need to--"

"Are you shittin' me, Margaret? And who you gonna love? The first dude who peeks out from under all that hair and wants to take you to San Francisco?"

"Wait a minute, Bill, I only --"

"No, you wait a minute, Margaret. You just wait one goddamn minute, here. You just wait till I tell you that I'm trying to build a life here. And you just wait one goddamn minute while I tell you that if you want to be a part of it, you gotta grow up. GROW UP, Margaret!"

He stormed out the door. I stood there in tears. He was right, but I was right. I was right about the wrong things, maybe.

Bitter, I stayed home. My thwarted trip to the Catskills shook our young marriage.

However, it also strengthened it when we emerged from the storm with a better understanding of ourselves, our limits and our commitment to each other.

I thought of becoming a hippie anyway, but in Ludington at the time I might have been arrested for shopping at the Sears store without a bra, even though before Sarah I really didn't need one. And I had no idea where in the world to buy pot or how to smoke it. Believe it or not I asked Mr. Luizzi at the drug store if they sold marijuana and if I needed a prescription.

He shook his head and said, "You definitely need a prescription for *something*, young lady."

A Methodist non-smoker, I decided if I ever came across any weed, I'd bake it into a batch of brownies.

The Summer of Love was such a long time ago. As Woodstock faded into the past, Bill's business flourished and Sarah was born. We bought what remained of an old farm near the edge of town and settled down to a middle class life. Soon we were Mr. and Mrs. Main Street. Mr. and Mrs., plus Sarah, of course.

I love my daughter. To no one but myself have I admitted I don't like her. She is ... in an uncanny way ... like my grandmother and in my opinion cares for herself more than the rest of us. I assume she loves her husband, Henry, in one way or another, but I've not seen much evidence of it. It's none of my business, of course, but the two of them exist in their own little world. Very intellectual, very selfish and very conceited. Neither Bill nor I ever suggest the four of us get together. We haven't discussed it, but I think we see the same picture of Sarah and Henry.

I always thought ... from the minute I brought her home from the hospital ... Sarah was not like other children I knew through friends and a few relatives. She lay in her crib or playpen and did nothing. I bought her toys as soon as she was able to sit up and placed them near her, but she appeared to have no interest. I put a squeeze toy in her playpen and came back in ten minutes and the toy had not moved. I wondered if she wanted me to pick her up all the time, but I tried not to. I didn't want her to grow up to be dependent and never move out into her own home.

When she approached age five, I took her to the elementary school nearby and attempted to register her. I was quite upset when they wouldn't take her. They suggested she spend another year at home.

"Oh, that's not possible," I said. "I have so much to do. My husband runs a large business and I'm needed to help out during the day."

"Well, I'm sorry," the school psychologist said, "but your child needs much, much more socialization. Who does she play with?" the woman asked.

"My husband and I," I replied

The woman was well meaning, I'm sure, but I don't know how she expected a busy person to do all she recommended. I'd have no life left over for me.

Those were the early years when Bill began his hardware store and he needed all the assistance he could get. Still, I recognized that perhaps Sarah should be taken to the playground more often and we did enroll her in a church play school. She loved it. And on those three mornings each week when she went to school, I was able to help out Bill and give more thought to hopefully someday finding my string. I didn't think Sarah was my string and certainly the hardware store wasn't.

As I lay in bed during the storm that night, after the ghosts left and I came wide awake, I realized there was so much to give up. I began to weigh all of it in my mind. Our home was such a blessing to us. I wasn't sure I'd be happy leaving it. The improvements we made to the homestead over the years cost us much labor, but it wasn't all work. I remembered skiing out back through the meadow and into the woods while the snow drifted down from a leaden sky. It clung to our clothing and turned Bill and Sarah and I into a line of three snowmen gliding down the trail.

And I would miss the huge old maple trees standing guard around the outside of the house. Bill tapped them in February when the temperature went above freezing on a sunny day. We stood out behind the little barn and boiled bucket after bucket of sap for hours and hours ... all weekend ... just for a gallon or two of syrup.

I knew I'd be sorry to leave the special room we added on the back of the house twenty years ago. How bright and cheerful it was in the early morning when I sat with my coffee, and the tall windows bathed me in the sunlight of a new day. I would remember the comfortable creaking of the floors in the old part of the house and the crazy angles of the doorways upstairs.

There were our many possessions, treasures inherited or bought over time that sweetened our lives. Most likely, they would not follow us south. My grandmother's china and heirlooms from Bill's family would need to find another home. Our dwindling physical abilities and a nest egg that was draining faster than we planned meant we would be in the market for a much smaller home that would not have as much space..

Leaving the town where the two of us grew up meant giving up familiar places like the little park near the waterfall and friends who had become dearer to us as the years rolled by.. Through the night as the storm continued to rage, a favorite picnic spot or a friendship or a keepsake to be left behind came to mind. I would have to relinquish them as heartlessly as if I never cared for any of them. I did indeed care. I loved my life in Michigan and never before thought of leaving. But I was weighed down by something that I was only beginning to understand. On one hand, everything right about our living up north argued for us to stay the course. But that plan admitted little chance we would ever do anything more as we grew older. We'd drown in our possessions, constantly tending and protecting them.

What a shame to sit among my treasures at my age and lose track of myself. Perhaps I had fulfilled my purpose with marriage and family, but it didn't seem so to me. I did not want to be a hero or famous or even well liked. But there must be something more waiting for me and it might be the most important part of my journey. Maybe selling out and heading south was just what I needed to continue the search for my purpose. I needed only to shed myself of stuff ... from an old existence with all its possessions ... and start over again. It sounded hackneyed to my ears, but it echoed true in my heart.

Even with all I had worked for and been given, I was left with a loss that nudged around my heart and left a dull ache. I wanted my life back. When I was 18, with everything before me, I had the freedom to make choices and to go where I wanted, do what I desired. But now I showed up for life each morning weighed down by all the dross I'd spent a lifetime accumulating. The thought of moving was frightening, but I could also sense the relief of finally letting go of the people and things I loved so much. They warmed the blood pumping through my heart, but they also held us prisoners. We had built a wonderfully comfortable life, but it became our jailer. We lived in a velvet lined prison.

What a thought ... to get rid of everything, to load a few essentials in the truck and head south. I wondered if we could do it. We would escape clearing the driveway in the winter and mowing the lawn precisely in the summer, and the constant pattering with all the chores that came with a big house, all those little jobs we found more difficult as arthritis set in and our energy levels dropped. Why was I still polishing my mother's silver?

I continued to wonder if my string was still out there waiting for me to find and pull on it. Leaving our home, family and friends wasn't going to be easy. But I found myself growing enthused. What an idea, I thought, what a *great* idea ... for both me *and* Bill.

Bill and I had talked about our need to concentrate on *us*. Lord knows we sometimes lost track of each other over the years, luckily re-discovering the other on a fairly regular basis. We came to know that our greatest treasure was the two of us. The care and tenderness and mutual regard that was natural to our early relationship had to be nurtured more as we aged. Too many of our friends divorced after age fifty and we didn't want to join them in their disappointment. If we were to stay together, we needed to spend time together.

After thirty-five years of marriage, we had everything we wanted. But we were willing to give up most of it and put the two of us back in the center of our lives. When I told Bill in the morning after the snowstorm I had thought it over and I would move south, he said, "Good, Margaret. I didn't want to stand by your

grave some day and wish I'd spent more time with you than mowing the grass or fixing a leak in the basement."

I laughed. "Well, that's *really* sweet."

"You're more fun than a leak in the basement any day," he said, and swatted my bottom.

The next morning I walked around our home, looking at each object and glancing out the windows at the lovely views of the pasture and forest. As I walked through the house, I wanted to assure myself I could leave and not regret it. I called my morning book club and begged off for that day, wanting time by myself, and in any case rather bored with the group. Come to think of it, many of my so called social activities were a bore.

I sat in the small library at the north end of the house, not sure I really wanted to leave. Confused by my need for my lovely things and my desire to get out from under them, I threw my hands up in the air and knocked over a small vase from my grandmother that sat on a shelf in front of a few of her old books. The vase tumbled into my lap, but before I could grab it, it fell to floor and shattered. I was struck with the thought I no longer had to be careful around it. My mother would have killed me for that thought, more so than for actually causing the accident. But I felt relieved I would no longer have to be the vase's custodian. I supposed that might also be true for everything else I had spent the morning fondling.

I picked up the ceramic pieces and took them to the kitchen to throw in the garbage under the sink, but I found I could not discard the vase, even in pieces, that meant so much to Grandma. I took them back into the small room where I kept her old sewing box beneath the shelves in a cabinet. Storing them here, I thought, would give me a temporary respite from the first of many decisions I would need to make about giving her things away. Inside the sewing box were her needles and spools of thread and a ball of yarn. I stopped. The yarn reminded me of the ball of string the Barbershop tenor had thrown to me. What was it in

the back of my mind? A ball of string or yarn now seemed so familiar, but elusive, like echoes of voices heard but not understood in the hallways of public buildings. In my mind the ball of string fluttered its wings but could not take flight as a cogent thought. I'd forgotten something, possibly, and needed to remember it. But for now, I couldn't.

Bill called me later in the day from a real estate office in town.

"I think I've found a few homes to look at down south," he said. "Vince and I have been going through books and they even have houses on the Internet now.

I could hear the happiness in his voice. Our adventure was about to begin.

"Oh," I said. "Well ... that's very nice, dear."

"You still want to do it, don't you?" he said.

"Of course I do, sweetheart," I said. "It's just that I thought we'd have a little more time"

"How much time did you want, Margaret?" I could hear his voice bristle over the phone.

"Please don't be harsh, Bill. This is a big step for me," I said.

"I know," he replied. "Me, too. But we have to start somewhere. I want to see how much we have to spend for a house down there and then get an appraisal for our house."

"Maybe we should get the appraisal first," I said.

"Vince is coming out tonight to give us an idea of how much he thinks we can get."

"Oh," I said.

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll handle the real estate stuff. You can handle Sarah, which I'll suggest you handle by calling her tonight."

I knew that I'd have to sit with Sarah and tell her soon. Why not right away, as Bill suggested. I was a little worried, but I couldn't possibly think she would care all that much since we didn't see a lot of each other. I called her at the

insurance office and said I wanted to come over to talk after supper. She seemed busy and didn't quiz me.

"Sure, come over anytime. Henry and I will be home. Gotta go. Love ya."
And she hung up.

When I arrived, the two were at their normal stations in the living room. I find it very annoying to try to have a conversation with people when there is a television set blaring away in the same room. I asked if we could turn it off.

"How about we wait till the end of this show to talk," Henry said.

Ten minutes later, I was finally able to broach the topic.

"Your father and I plan to move to the Carolinas," I began by saying to Sarah..

"When?" asked Henry.

"We're talking to real estate people now and hope to have everything settled and us moved south in a few months. If all goes well," I said.

"Well ... that's nice, Mom," Sarah said. "If that's what you really want to do."

"I'm not sure how you mean that," I said, "but of course I want to go. Why wouldn't I?"

"I just meant 'if that's what you really want to do.' It's a saying, that's all." she said.

We were all silent for a moment.

"I mean --" she said, "--well it's like I'm happy to know you've thought it through. There must have been some awfully big negatives ... leaving the house, your hometown ... you know."

"Yes, there were," I said.

"And you're my Mom and I don't want to give you advice, but I guess you would have really, really thought this through and so you must have decided you really, really wanted to move south."

"Well, that's a fairly accurate description of what I did," I said. "I really, really thought it through and that's our decision. Your father and I are actually quite excited about it."

“That’s good, Mom.” she said.

There was more silence.

“How much do you think you can get for that big old place?” asked Henry.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Bill is handling all of that.”

Henry glanced over at the television set with longing, I thought.

When I arrived home not long afterward, Bill and his real estate representative were touring our home.

The two men seemed to talk forever as they walked from room to room and I moved ahead of them out of the way. Later Bill was anxious to tell me his news.

“Vince thinks we can get a good price for the house, hon,” he said.

“We put a lot into this house, Bill,” I said.

“And it looks like we’ll get our money back , and then some,” he said.

“I didn’t mean money,” I said.

“OK, I know what you mean,” he said. He walked over from the other side of the room and stood directly in front of me. I began to cry.

“What are you saying, Margaret?”

“It’s just all so sudden,” I said.

“Do you want to wait till next year?” he said.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said.

“Have you changed your mind?” he asked.

“I don’t *know*, Bill,” I cried.

When we went to bed that night, we were silent. I’m sure Bill was disappointed, but he knew I’d tell him what I wanted to do and he would wait for me to make up my mind. It would be so easy to just forget the move. Just get up in the morning and sit in our special room and let the sunshine warm me while I looked out over our pasture and the woods. Listen for the familiar church bells at noon the old pastor insisted on ringing each day to remind us that “God got you half way through the day and He’ll get you through the rest.”

Fall was coming and I loved to light a fire in the huge fireplace in the living room. That was the first big project we began after buying the house. A

farmhouse from the late 1800's did not have an original fireplace, because such a device was the absolute least efficient way to heat a home. By then, iron stoves were widely used. A fireplace wasn't what we needed to spend money on when other parts of the house were in immediate need of renovation, but we saw it as the soul of the house for us and we wanted it "big enough to walk in," as Bill said.

Oh, this seemed so crazy. In the period of only a few days I had entertained the possibility of selling out and moving south and then made the decision. But now I realized I was of the opposite opinion. Worse, I realized I might feel a certain way one week and different the next. How could I possibly plan a future when I didn't know if I would reach the same conclusion a week later? What if we went through with the move and after a few months down south I found I missed my home and friends so much I wanted to move back? All would be lost to me; I'd never get our house back and we'd probably live in a boring modern house over in the next town where they were building what looked like nothing more than cardboard boxes with no character at all. At that we'd be lucky, because we might lose a lot of money buying a house in the south and selling it soon afterward to return north. By the time we arrived back in Ludington we could be financially strapped and forced to live in an apartment or a mobile home on the south side of town. Why would I want to chance all of that when I could just do nothing? Just get up tomorrow morning and continue to live here as though the past week had never happened. It might be boring, but tedium could be the price of a secure living.

And my string. Wasn't my string everywhere? Didn't that sign downstairs in the church hall proclaiming "Bloom Where You're Planted" mean God met us where we lived? It must be a lot easier for Him to come meet us than for us to go off looking for Him. There was no need to travel to Nineveh, unless you were Jonah.

In the morning, I got up early, made coffee and took a cup into the back room overlooking the pasture and woods. How could I leave this, I thought. A few minutes later Bill came in and sat down.

“Are we going?” he asked

“No,” I said. “I mean ... maybe.”

“It’s not easy for you, I know,” he said.

“Bill, how can we leave all this? Look out that window at the beauty of this place. And can we sell or give away all the things in this house we worked so hard for?”

“We don’t use hardly any of it anymore,” he said. “We haven’t lit a fire in the living room in five years.”

“But we worked for it, Bill,” I said.

He was silent.

I looked over to him. “I think at this moment I just see us staying here, enjoying the fruits of our labor.”

“Then you’re thinking,” he said, “like a woman who expects to live forever.”

Bill left for work and I got dressed and spent the morning paying bills and then trying to read a novel I had started, but my mind refused to concentrate on the story. Just before I made myself lunch, I decided to walk through the house to see once again how I would feel leaving my home and most of everything in it. In the little library on the north side of the house, I sat in the beautiful old low back chair from Bill’s Great Aunt Lydia. I pulled the sewing box out of the cabinet and opened it. *I’m sorry I broke your vase, Grandma*, I said to myself. *Nothing lasts forever*, came right back in my head, in the voice of my mother, surprisingly.

I picked up the ball of yarn and held it in both hands picking out the end of the string of yarn and winding it around my index finger. I pulled off more yarn, winding it through my fingers and around my hand. I kept pulling yarn and winding it over my knuckles as the ball of yarn got smaller and smaller. I hated to see the ball get smaller, like watching something work backwards, but I compulsively kept pulling yarn off the ball until there was no ball. The ball was gone. I yanked the yarn off my hand and threw it across the room.

Sitting back in the chair I glanced out the window when I heard the bells ring. About a half mile away, the spire of the local church sprouted up among the bare

branches of maple trees and stood out against a perfect blue sky. My thoughts turned to the cemetery lying beyond the church. I supposed in less than twenty years I'd be ready for a plot there or somewhere. I hoped that on that day in the future when I knew my life was over I would not have to regret my last years spent doing little more than waiting for the undertaker. Here was one instance when I could take an example from a woman I spent so much of my life disliking. It was time to go see my mother.

Although I had limited contact with my Mother after I left for college, I begrudgingly admired her pluck and, in truth, never stopped loving her. By age 50, my mother found an old sourpuss of a man in Florida who died after a few years of marriage and conveniently left her enough money to live comfortably for a while. This was more than my father left her. She often said the man who gave me life died in a forest in Belgium in a war he need not have entered. He could have had an important job in Washington scheduling all the new bombers that were ferried to Europe. It exempted him from service, but he chose to enlist anyway.

Mother lived on her own after Sourpuss went to his reward for what I assumed would be the rest of her life. And then things changed. I remember the night she called me as she began to pull on a new string. I spoke to her the Christmas before and was surprised when I heard her voice again on the phone. She seemed happy, an unfamiliar sound.

"I've met a wonderful man," she said. She said that about Sourpuss years before, I remembered.

"I've sold my Florida house," she continued.

"Where are you, Mother?" I asked.

"In Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Oh, it's lovely here, Margaret."

"Are you in jail?" I asked, laughing.

"Of course not, dear. I'm with Arthur."

Thus began Mother's Great Adventure, as I called it. At age 72 she took up with a colorful man she met in an Orlando shopping mall as he sat painting small portraits for \$4.99. Mother's new man had no house and hardly any middle class values of the type that would keep one running in place at a car dealership or an insurance agency every day until he died of boredom. He was educated at Dartmouth, although few knew it until his funeral. Arthur was simply like Charlie Chaplin, not born for these Modern Times. He lived for art, and though he was evidently not a terrific craftsman, he loved it anyway.

Arthur had an old car and no house. He sold his car. Mother sold her home and together they took off. They lived a Spartan life from a motor home, painting small portraits together between Cape May and Florida for the next seven years. Mother was never so happy.

Only later in life did she tell me that after news came of my father's death in 1944 she often sat at her piano in the dining room, a young mother, feeling dead, stuck, and half buried. She thought her life was over. Never did she imagine she would one day live on the road like a circus performer, going out to dinner in the evening if she and Arthur sold enough paintings. She eventually told me she was absolutely convinced God loved her, and she didn't complain he had taken his time getting around to giving her a wonderful life.

When she died, Arthur hadn't a clue how to handle the situation. So we brought her back to Ludington and had her interred up the road next to the little church where the bells were rung each noon.

The weather had turned warm and the edges of the road were clear of ice, so after lunch I walked up past the church and stood next to her headstone in the graveyard. I had almost hated this woman after the night she locked me out in the backyard. Hated and loved her at the same time. Even after our coming closer together the last decade of her life, I stepped carefully around her, my bruises still smarting from what I considered abandonment. Of course, I could understand

how she must have felt as a young war widow, stuck in a small town on the side of Lake Michigan with a baby girl to care for. But she wasn't the only woman who lost her husband. Couldn't we have gone off to a new life together? I wouldn't have stood in the way of her finding another man. I was just a kid. I needed a life, too.

"I'm your *daughter*, god damn it," I cried out loud. How I wished I had said that to her when I was in high school.

My cry drifted through the surrounding headstones as I drew the crisp air into my lungs with a sob.

Why she didn't want me, I don't know. On her headstone, I had asked the monument company to inscribe "loving wife of Edward," but only because it was traditional. I had no idea if she loved him. If I assumed she did, then what must it have been like to receive the telegram that told of him never returning? And what if Bill had been killed just after Sarah was born? I would never have abandoned Sarah. But frankly, as she got older and took care of herself, my need for a life might convince me that it was best for her to become an independent young woman while I went off in search of ... my string.

Mother may have considered how short life was, and that it could end sooner than expected. When Bill said I was thinking like someone who believed I would live forever, I knew what he meant. I had many friends who wishfully remained in place in life hoping it would go on forever. But it doesn't. We can bar the door, pull down the shades and pretend the Grim Reaper is not out on the front porch waiting for us. Or we can embrace change, the future and our eventual demise. And toward the end of our trip in life we can sit drunk in a dark room like those at a wake in a James Joyce story or we can drive up and down the east coast painting portraits for supper money, all the while feeling like God is providing his best to us.

I put my hand on my mother's headstone.

"Pray for your daughter, Mommy," I said.

I walked back home, feeling lighter. In the house, I again moved through the rooms. All these wonderful things surrounding me ... the baby grand piano, the walk-in fireplace, the fields behind the house ... they all owned me. For the first time I realized the weight I carried around was the weight of what I thought I loved. I began to resent everything that held me. I wasn't going to live forever and I needed to keep walking out my life and not stand still on the tracks. With my comfortable home and belongings under my arm, I'd be run down by that big train bound for glory. I wanted someday to draw my last breath knowing I had finished the course, maybe followed my string, and not be totally surprised that I was about to experience death, the most obvious and pressing of all human expectations.

In the small library again, I picked up the mess of yarn from the floor and carried it to the living room, where I took kindling and began a small blaze in the fireplace. When the fire began to burn cheerily, I added pieces of split wood and sat back in its warmth. I began to wind the yarn into a ball.

A different kind of fire inside me wanted to burn away what held me here and to set me free. If I didn't let it, the fire would instead consume my soul and leave only my aging body, a dulled mind and a predictable social calendar.

I remembered the ghostly quartet from the roof in the storm a few nights ago. They were on their way out the window the last time I saw them. I wanted to follow, but was afraid. In my mind I stared out the window and nothing down on the ground appeared certain. Even if I didn't clearly see a soft landing spot down there in my future, if I allowed the fire to begin its work in the room behind me I couldn't stay. Once I began to admit I resented playing the captive to this house, my role of Mrs. Margaret Main Street was over. And when the past is over, it is truly over. In my imagination I found my feet planted on the window ledge, toes gripping the edge of the sill in fear of the fire of resentment now raging behind me. I knew I couldn't go back. I had little choice but to jump. And hope for a string to grab on to on the way down.

We sold almost everything and gave away the rest, except for what we'd never give up... my wedding dress, Bill's coin collection, not much else. He sold his woodshop and I sold all of my grandmother's china. Sarah didn't want any of it.

We came down here to the shore and bought this tiny house. It sits on a sandy street two blocks back from the beach. We couldn't see the ocean from our front door, but we could smell it. We were like two kids. Bill made love to me our first night here. The first time in ten years and I was as embarrassed as on our wedding night. The last time, too, truth be told.

We slept on the floor for a few nights in our bungalow before we found a furniture store with reasonable prices.

"Newlyweds?" the sales lady joked when we said we needed just about everything.

"Yes," Bill told her. He glanced at me and said, "This here's the girl I wanted to marry when I was in the Navy. And I did, more than thirty years ago."

And, oh Lord, the ocean. I could walk to it any morning my knees allowed and sit on the sand and wonder if God created her just for me.. She crashed on to the shore, surrounded me and held me in her arms, her water warm and tender. At night the moon made love to the ocean as she heaved her self up for anyone with eyes to see. Their rhythmic pounding was easily heard. I walked along the shoreline barefoot, splashing in their tears of joy.

And such a moon! The phrase "Carolina Moon" meant nothing to me until the first night I saw it come up while we sat on the beach. It was so big.

"Bill," I said, reaching over for his hand, "the moon is exciting me."

"What's so exciting about the moon coming up for the zillionth time," he said.

"I mean, *exciting* me," I said. "Like the times we got a sitter and went out on a date and I left my underwear at home."

"Oh," he said.

Our small town on the shore was deserted in the winter. I loved it when just the tiny group of full time residents owned the streets after October. The tourist restaurants were closed down, but the places we could afford stayed open. Before my legs went, I'd walk down to the shore and get a cup of coffee and sit for an hour or two staring out the window at the sea on cool winter days. Sometimes I'd have a second cup and once in a while I bought breakfast, but the waitresses never bothered me to buy anything.

One morning a teenage girl brought me coffee. I hadn't seen her before and I said I hoped Ella, the woman who normally had the morning shift, was OK.

"Oh, yes," the girl replied, "she's just off to Charleston to pick up her son at the airport. He's back from the fighting in ... wherever that place is."

"Iraq?" I said.

"Yes'm. I guess."

"It's so sad our young people have to go there," I said.

She sighed and gazed out the window. She looked tired. It was 9:00 a.m. and she had probably been up and working since 5:00.

"I'd go anywhere," she said, "to get out of this town."

I laughed. Bill and I had sold all our possessions, said to good bye to our families and headed off into the sunset like two hobos just to come to this town.

"You'll find your string someday," I said, knowing she wouldn't have a clue to my meaning.

"String?" she said. Her brow knit in confusion. "Oh," she said, "you mean a string like those kids followed home in the woods?"

"Wasn't that a trail of bread crumbs?" I said.

"Oh yeah," said the girl, "but the birds ate them. Bummer."

"Yes," I replied, "bummer."

"But birds always stick around for more," she said. "So if you couldn't follow the crumbs, you could follow the birds."

She picked up the tray she had been carrying and began to leave the table. I stopped her. Something occurred to me. If not the crumbs, then the birds. And then another

thought dawned. I remembered the Barbershop tenor's ball of string in my dream and my grandmother's ball of yarn. I now knew why they were so important. They were telling me Pastor John's story wasn't correct. He had it backwards.

"I remember reading of a Golden String in college," I told her. "Have you ever heard of William Blake?"

"No, ma'm," she said.

She busied herself arranging items on her tray and I couldn't tell if she was interested, but I had to speak what was now racing through my mind.

"He was a great poet and artist ... an engraver by trade ... in the early 1800s. He wrote, 'I give you the end of a golden string. Only wind it into a ball: It will lead you in at Heavens gate, Built in Jerusalem's wall.'"

"Why would you wind it into a ball?" she asked

"He meant to keep the string tight. The story comes from the ancient Greeks. A warrior was given a golden string to follow out of a maze created by monsters. The warrior let the string go slack and she wasted time finding her way out.

"She? It was a warrior girl?"

"Look for your string, honey," I said, my voice rising. "You hold it tight, OK?. If you can't follow it right at that moment, you hold it tight so you don't lose it. Do you understand?"

"Sure, Ma'm."

"You find your string and hold on tight. Or let it find you. You might not see it. You might have to look for where it has been. Follow it where it takes you. Do you understand what I'm saying, honey? Do you? Oh, I'm not making sense, am I."

The girl looked at me with concern on her face. I was getting agitated.

"Are you OK, M'am?" she asked.

"Yes, dear," I said, taking a breath and trying to appear calm. "It's just awfully important to know we won't always see You have to follow ... Oh, I don't know, sweetheart. I'm just having an Old Lady Day, I guess. Sorry I'm ranting."

“You should follow your dream?” said the girl.

“Yes, honey. Follow your dream.”

I walked outside on the deck overlooking the ocean. We should all follow our dreams if we ever figure out which dreams to follow. I breathed deeply of the wonderful sea air. I breathed again, this time letting it out slowly, savoring it.

The passage from Blake hadn't come to mind since my college days. When I first read his “Jerusalem” I remembered seeing the similarity of The Golden String to Pastor John's account of trying to win a cap pistol by pulling on the right string.

Blake's allusion to the Greek story that spoke of a string given to us to follow out of the maze was not the same as the picture I took with me from Pastor John's story. Rather than winning a prize, Blake spoke of a path out of chaos to clarity. Pastor John's memory was of a little boy trying to get what he wanted. I could identify with the cap pistol story. When I read Blake as a young woman I hardly envisioned the coming adult years would breed chaos in my soul. And I would not have been ready to be a part of someone's plan I didn't understand. So Pastor John's idea of a gift at the other end of the string was the more comfortable abiding image left in my mind.

In the coffee shop when Blake's golden string popped into my head, I realized the idea of finding a prize was a child's dream and didn't fit well with my adult experience. It occurred to me the string itself was the real gift. It was a call from whatever or whoever ordered the universe. It pulled me closer as it encouraged my role in an unfolding story.

I stood on the deck looking over the ocean and saw wave after wave arrive on the sand. Down the beach large pieces of driftwood and smaller flotsam had come ashore. My eye caught a small conifer, a tiny Christmas tree, floating among the larger pieces. Each time a wave nudged its way onto the beach and flowed around the heavier tree trunks, it found the small Christmas tree and lifted it up on the water, as if offering it to heaven.

Blake understood we don't choose or find the string. It finds us among the litter of our existence ... where I was born, where I traveled to, my family and most of the people I met. In that debris I was formed and in that debris I would serve my purpose. Perhaps I would never see my string clearly, but I could follow its urgings and seek what added to life rather than what took away. I was to follow this ethereal shadow of a string through the maze. I might only see where it had been ... if not the crumbs, the birds ... and that in itself could be the lesson. As I moved toward Heaven's Gate I would wind all of this into a ball that grew larger ... the ball tossed to me by the Barber Shop tenor.

Someone sighed behind me.

"You look like you're brooding over something," Bill said

"I've been looking at the string wrong," I said to no one in particular.

"Ah, the string again," he said.

"It pulls me. I don't pull it," I said.

"Didn't you tell me a long time ago that I was your string?" he said with a smile.

"No, I thought you were supposed to help me find it," I said. "You did, in a way."

"What about my string?" he said. "Don't I get one?"

"Yes, but I don't know what it is," I said.

"Maybe you're my string," he said. "I watch you. I admire you. I don't understand you always, but I believe you were given to me so that I could listen to you. Not when you're trying to tell me what to do, bossing me around. But I listen when you are struggling and I learn from you."

"You never seem to struggle, Bill," I said.

"You know I do," he said.

"I don't watch you like you say you watch me."

"I know," he said and smiled. "How could you? You're busy watching yourself."

"I guess that's true," I said. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t be,” he said. “It’s just who you are. Sometimes you are your own burden.”

“It sounds terrible, but I think that might be true,” I said.

“It is true and it’s perfectly OK with me. I love you.”

I seldom remembered that we would not live forever. I lost Bill two years ago, on a night I went to dinner and a movie with a few girl friends. Never interested in cell phones, I didn’t know what happened until I got home and found a police car in my driveway and a neighbor sitting on my front porch. Bill had a heart attack as he sat in front of the television. Just like that he was gone. After a lifetime together, we were not allowed to say good bye.

Sarah came down for the funeral when I told her I wanted Bill buried in Carolina so I could visit him. Her husband remained up north and seemed not to take much interest in the passing of his father-in-law, with whom he probably had less than a dozen conversations.

We had a traditional open casket wake and then a funeral service at the interment in the cemetery. I was sorry I opted for it. Seeing Bill in the casket broke my heart and I would have rather not seen him at all. I should probably have had him cremated, so I could carry him around in the trunk of my car as a neighbor lady did to keep her husband close.

Last year brought my cancer diagnosis. “The body falling apart,” was the way I thought of it. I’d have a year, possibly more, said the doctor. The end loomed into sight.

“After Dad dying and you getting sick, you should come back up to Ludington to live,” my daughter said to me.

It made some sense, but I hated to leave Carolina. Hated to never see my ocean again or feel the moon caress me with its light.

“I’ll come back to Ludington and try it,” I told Sarah, “but I’m not selling our place down here.”

“That’s crazy,” she said. “You’ll never live here again.”

That couldn't be true, I thought. I didn't want it to be true.

I went back up north to live with Sarah ... and lasted two months. Only a short time in that cold country was tougher on my soul than the years I spent growing up, marrying and having a child there. I thought I'd freeze every day I was there. At one time I had photos of me in Luddington, all the way back to when I was a child, always dressed in a sweater and often a coat.

A small trailer behind my son-in-law's car carried what I needed from my home near the shore up to Michigan. That included the tiny 12 inch tall ceramic Christmas tree I bought a few months after Bill died.

"Is that like a memorial to Bill?" Henry asked the first time he saw it on my little table in my room.

"I keep his ashes in it," I said. The man clearly didn't know how to respond.

I patted the hand-painted tree and said, "Bill was such a gift to me. Like a Christmas present."

When he told Sarah he felt uncomfortable with Bill's ashes in the house, she reminded him his father-in-law was safe in the ground down south at the Abiding Light Cemetery.

Eight weeks with Sarah was enough for any mother of a girl with so little imagination that she thought filing papers all day in a ten person insurance agency was an important career. I felt terrible for not being able to relate to my own daughter. One of the reasons I went north was the hope we might finally form a relationship, which we had not enjoyed since she was ten or eleven years old. I did try with all my might. For God's sake, I told myself, I brought her into the world, nursed her and tried to be a good mother. I loved my daughter, but I was cursed with never having the ability to feel it. She was not very loveable. But if I tried harder, there might be a breakthrough. There wasn't.

Once I told her about searching for my string. She replied, "My string would be to become a certified life insurance consultant."

"I meant something more ... profound," I said.

"You always want to be profound, Mother," she said with a withering tone.

I could not think of any examples that didn't sound like "to save the world, the baby whales and good old time rock and roll." Oh, what was the use? She would never understand. I had a vision of locking her in a room and playing Joplin albums over and over until she screamed, "I get it, I get it!"

My sitting depressed around her house all day probably annoyed her. She may have thought my memories made me low, but those damned Lake Michigan winters were the cause of my feeling lousy. And the ultimate realization that my daughter and I would never be close. We didn't even think alike. She thought the moon was a big rock. She didn't know it was a lover.

Sarah advised me to look ahead and to go forward. Well, yes, that was how I got to the Carolinas, but a cancer diagnosis at my age didn't leave much road left to travel. I didn't want to go forward. I missed my home down south. I wanted to go back to Carolina.

And so I did, without her assistance. She refused to help me arrange to move the furniture and other keepsakes I'd brought for my room in her house.

"I have to go back home, Sarah," I told her. "You've been wonderful to me, but I need to get back to *my* home."

"This is crazy," she said, "and I'll have nothing to do with your going back."

If she thought that would stop me, it was she who was crazy.

Betty and Frank Winslow, younger friends down south, drove all the way up with a small rental trailer and moved me back home. Just getting back here was a challenge. I really didn't get out of the house much in Michigan since Sarah and Henry were either working or watching television most of the time. I knew my legs were refusing to carry me as far as they once had, but when Betty and Frank and I stopped at the first rest area on the way south, I found what all my sitting around had done to my body. Half way across the parking lot I had to stop and half sit on the bumper of an empty SUV.

"I'll go back for the car," said Frank. "Betty, stay here with Margaret and I'll give the two of you a ride to the building."

“No, Frank,” I said, embarrassed, “I’ll be all right. Just let me catch my breath and rest these legs. Just for a minute.”

Undecided, he glanced at Betty, but she was looking at me, concerned.

“Margaret, does your arm hurt or are you seeing little red and blue lights buzzing around your eyes?”

“You’ve been reading your AARP magazines, again,” I said. “I’m not having a heart attack, Betty. I am simply very much out of shape. I’ve been sitting in a small room for two months. There might as well have been bars on the door.”

“Oh, Margaret,” she said. “I’m so sorry. We didn’t know. Were they abusive to you?”

“No, Betty, they were fine. Just boring,” I said. “Their idea of a good time was to see how many quiz show questions they could answer.”

“Because I was reading an article on elder abuse –“

“Betty,” I said, interrupting her, “I was not abused. Period.”

Frank left to get the car and Betty told me about the article anyway. She was interrupted when the SUV’s owners returned to their vehicle and wanted to know if they could help. But their tone of voice said we were holding them back from moving on down the highway.

“Stubbed my toe,” I said to them. “I’m all right, but I’m worried about my friend here,” and I pointed at Betty. I grabbed her arm as if she was in need of an escort and dragged her toward the building. Poor Frank rode around looking for us, probably needing to use the bathroom.

When we were back on the road I made light of our adventure by saying I must have had a spell of some sort that hopefully wouldn’t repeat itself. And it didn’t, because after that Frank always dropped us off at the front door at each rest top.

I truly did not feel good. That trip was the longest of my life, and it didn’t start well. On the day we pulled out of Sarah’s driveway, she was busy at her insurance job. She never called me after I left, but she sent cards instead. Her messages were not really warm. She let the card’s printed words say something

endearing, but for herself there was only her signature. She could have written something personal. I felt like calling her up and asking if there was an insurance policy to protect against having ungrateful children.

My sickness has been more evident since I returned home, but down here it is more bearable. I don't get out much, except when I'm taken to doctor appointments. An aide comes three times each week to help keep me and the place clean. People from a local church deliver my meals.

Of course, I couldn't get out of this chair the past few days to answer the door at 10:15 when Loretta, that lovely young woman from the meals service, would knock once, stick her head in the front door and call my name. She normally brought in my meal and placed it on the table. She's not supposed to, but since the other day when she first realized I could not get over there, she has brought it to me and helped me open the styrofoam container. Today she noticed the pad of paper as I put it aside.

"Whatcha writing?" she asked.

"My life story," I said. "You play a major part toward the end."

"Not too close to the end, I hope," she said. "You've got a lot of life left in you."

"You're like the daughter I never had," I said to her.

"I thought you told me you had a daughter," she said.

"Yes, I do, but you're like the daughter I should have had," I said.

"Oh, c'mon," she said. "If my mother ever said that about me, I'd be heartbroken."

"I don't think my daughter would," I said.

"Just 'cause you don't get along with her? Or like the way she lives or something?" she said.

I was sorry I brought this up. "It's complicated," I said.

"You think so?" she said. "Maybe she just doesn't know how to love you."

"Well, I surely don't know how to love her," I said.

“You should tell her that,” said Loretta.

“She wouldn’t want to hear it,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Loretta. “You’re the mother. You owe it to her.”

I sat looking at the phone for the longest time after Loretta left. I sensed she was right. I wouldn’t have said I was at fault for anything. But Loretta’s words kept coming to me, “You’re the mother. You owe it to her.” I am indeed the Mother and she is the child. I suppose everything was my fault.

I put the idea of calling Sarah out of my mind so that I could get back to writing my story, but every time I looked up from the pad of paper my eyes drifted to the phone on the table next to my chair. I wanted to write. I didn’t want the idea of calling Sarah to interrupt what I planned to do. The third time I told myself to forget about the call for today I remembered an argument I’d had with Bill when Sarah was still a little girl. I was tired of working at the hardware store and wanted to take a course in the Origins of Egyptian Civilization at the local unit of the State College. I felt that I owed myself the opportunity to broaden my intellectual pursuits.

“It’s OK to find yourself,” he said, “but don’t lose your little girl in the process.”

Had I lost Sarah due to my lack of interest in her? I had to admit motherhood never felt like it was a perfect fit on me. I wondered if my mother had felt the same about me. I thought probably she did. How hard that was for me. It hurt more deeply than anything else in my life.

I decided to call Sarah that afternoon. I would call her up and tell her I didn’t know how to love her. But I wanted to. I called her at the insurance office. I didn’t want to wait until evening because I might have lost my nerve.

“She’s in a meeting,” a sweet voice told me over the telephone.

“I don’t care if she is interviewing Mother Theresa,” I said. “This is her mother and I need to talk to her.”

A minute later Sarah came on the line.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Just fine,” I said. “I ... uh ... I just wanted to talk to you.”

“Well, gee, Mother, couldn’t you have called me at home tonight?”

“I was afraid I’d lose my nerve,” I said, “About what I wanted to say to you.”

She said nothing for a moment.

“Mom,” she said, “her voice softer now, “if you’re calling me up to complain about something I did wrong while you were up here, I ... I just don’t know what I did that you didn’t like.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I said. “I did. I neglected to tell you the entire time I was there that I loved you. Sarah, I just don’t know how to show it. And I’ll be honest, I don’t know if I feel it ... not always.”

“Well, gee, thanks, Mom,” she said. “Hi, I love you but I don’t feel it? Are you serious, Mom?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I’m sorry. It’s not your fault. It’s mine. I just didn’t know how to tell you that. But I decided that I want you to be my daughter and I have to start by being honest.”

“Mom, do you realize how much I love you?” She was crying now. “And I feel it, Mom. I really feel it. What am I supposed to say when you tell me you don’t?”

“I didn’t say I never felt it,” I said, trying to make my revelation to her a little more palatable.

“Well, I don’t know what to do about this,” she said.

“You could begin by accepting me. You must have friends who aren’t perfect,” I said.

Henry came to mind, but I didn’t mention him.

I don’t know what the nine other workers in the insurance agency thought was going on. She once told me they were almost all women. Assuming they had mothers at one time or another, I’m sure they understood.

“I felt like such a failure when you said you wanted to leave,” she told me. “I would have done anything to make you stay. I’m sorry I wasn’t ready to let you have your own life.”

“Sometimes I feel like I never gave you a chance,” I told her, “or honored who you are. Just like my mother didn’t like who I was.”

We finally said good bye.

“Mommy,” she said, “I love you so much.”

When I’ve been ashamed of my lukewarm feelings for Sarah, I’ve brought to mind her emotional love for me and I remember similar feelings I had for my mother at one time. It has somehow made up for my lack.

The lady next door who carries her husband around in the trunk of her car has a daughter and baby who are standing by to live here while I’m at Mrs. Lampfer’s Home. She may have to wait a day or two. I am probably not going to Lampfer’s tomorrow. I’m not getting any better. This afternoon I tried to stand, but fell back down in this chair. If I let the people from Lampfer’s in they will find a way to take me to a nursing home, so I’m not letting them in. OK, OK, I know it’s inevitable, but I don’t want to go just yet. When the orderlies arrive here, I will be at the door waiting for them. I’ll shout through the door that I’m not ready to go. Maybe in a day or two. I don’t know what they’ll do. What can they do, come back with a sheriff? Maybe I’ll call the place and try to talk to Mrs. Lampfer. Come back on Friday, I’ll tell her, I’ll be ready then. But I guess I have to face it. If I’m not standing and walking around by Friday, it’s over for me.

The sun is down early tonight and I haven’t turned any lights on. The beautiful moon is rising up through the pines and it’s peeking through my window. I look down at my dirty pajamas. I put them on clean this morning. Or yesterday. I think I did, but I’m not sure. In ten minutes, when the moon is above the trees, its strong light will shine down on me and appear to bleach my pajamas clean. Or I could take them off and let the moon make love to me.

I suppose I could have stayed in our old family home up north and never come here. I’d be dying with my comfortable treasures around me, but I don’t think Grandma’s china would help me feel any better. Anyway, all that is the past. Where I’m going has no past and by definition eternity can’t have a future.

In the moonlight I sense the ocean down the street. I thought I heard Bill clear his throat a few minutes ago, but I know I imagined it. I miss him so much. He was a light to me and an example. He taught me the important things in life ... love and loyalty and selflessness. I was not an apt student, and often not even appreciative. But I am convinced I found the right teacher. I pulled him close and held on tight. I would have never let go, but forever doesn't happen in this life.

Bill's reasons for coming here may have been practical, but I've come to see what I wanted for myself was to clear the decks of everything that distracted from my being awake to a real life. To cast off the weight of a modern existence before the end and to sit by the ocean and breathe in and breathe out. I suppose I was trying to make my soul light enough to fly again, like the day I sat in a pop-up tent and laughed as my dog licked butter off God's tummy.

The moon is up above the trees now. It is indeed a big rock, but to see it as a lover is to comprehend a miracle, and that is our ability to sense the immensity of what we cannot see or understand by speaking of it with the heart. I do not know the purpose of the universe and I do not truly know my purpose in it. I do believe a string connects me to something, but I don't know what it is, only that its goodness has pulled me along my path. As I get closer to Heaven's Gate, pondering the matter seems less important. Last night I dreamed I was lugging around a ball of golden string that had grown as large as a basketball. There can't be much string left to follow.

.Copyright 2013, David Griffin

The Windswept Press

Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

www.windsweptpress.com