I'M TELLING YOU NOW, WHEREVER YOU ARE

An Adirondack Correctional Facility Anthology of Writing
Edited by Tyler Barton, Adirondack Center for Writing
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FOREWORD by Tyler Barton

Though we began meeting in March of 2022, it was not until July that the men in this workshop showed me their faces. I remember walking in to the prison after the Independence Day break and being greeted by a maskless Ms. Orlando. Then, in class, I met the eight smiling men whose expressions for months I’d been reading with only the information conveyed by their eyes, foreheads, and posture. “Hello, everyone,” I said, my mask in my pocket. “It’s really good to see you.”

It was heartening moment, but it was far from the first time I felt a connection to the students. That came early, when my worry about whether we’d be able to fill ten minutes with sharing was assuaged by a collection of raised hands; when I heard the comments, questions, anecdotes, and jokes that popped up after a classmate shared; or when students started coming to class with things they’d written on their own time, things they just wanted to get off their chest, and things they wanted me to hear. Early on I found that if we read a one-page essay or poem, there’d be discussion from the group to fill many, many pages. I’d come home from class and tell my wife about the thought and energy the students put into reading. She once asked, “It sounds like they’re better readers than students you’ve had anywhere else.”

“Oh, yeah. I think they’re better readers than I am,” I said.

I couldn’t have asked for a better group to be my first cohort of incarcerated students, not only for their eagerness to share, to read, and to discuss, but also in their willingness to try off-beat and angular approaches to writing. We drafted pieces written entirely in questions, made erasure poems from issues of Adirondack Life, penned haikus, told stories both true and fictional (some of which even rhyme). Many of them had not written before, and the ones who had were just as open to trying
things completely new to them. Even in my thirties, I find it hard to try new things, convinced I already know what I like in the world and what I don’t. My experience in this class has convinced me to never lose the ability to take a risk and try something new.

Maybe you’re trying something new right now, giving your time and energy to read writing from folks behind bars. Either way, I think you’ll find many sentences, paragraphs, pages, and pieces in this anthology that remind you of the struggles, dreams, ideas, memories, and observations you’ve had yourself. And if they don’t, well, isn’t that so exciting? Something new?

I want to thank Ben, Harold, Maurice, John, Don, Kelly, Louis, and Miguel for being part of this class. A special thanks goes to Suzanne Orlando for being my guide through this process, and for always helping to make class more enjoyable and rich in discussion. This would not be possible without the blessing of the entire staff of the Adirondack Correctional Facility, DOCCS, Lifetime Arts, and NYSCA. Thanks also to Nathalie Thill for giving me the opportunity to do this project, and for always offering her invaluable advice and constant support.

Sincerely,
Tyler Barton

The stories, essays, poems, and songs included in this anthology were written over the course of sixteen writing workshops which took place at Adirondack Correctional Facility in Ray Brook, NY during the spring and summer of 2022. This program was created and facilitated by Tyler Barton of the Adirondack Center for Writing in collaboration with Lifetime Arts and the New York State Council for the Arts.
I REMEMBER THE TIMES I MET YOU by Harold G.

Here at the Adirondack, where at times my life feels like the end of my journey, sometimes I reflect on my past. I could write about money, home, cars, or girls. But no. What I remember are the animals my family owned, back in the good old days, in Trinidad.

I remember my first fish I had bought from my friend, who is now my brother-in-law. I gave him thirty cents. It looked like a tiny, crazy, wild fish. I remember my dad yelling at me, and almost throwing the fish out. He said I wasted my money and my friend tricked me. Then it started to change into a beautiful blue Siamese fighting fish, and my dad fell in love with it.

One night, my pregnant aunt Pulmati came to our home — she’d had the baby, my cousin Vinnie, in the early morning. Later that morning, I noticed my fish had died. So, we all said that the life or soul of the fish entered the baby, that Vinnie had taken the place of the fish. We all called her “Fighter,” after my fish.

I remember the many goats we had. There were milking and non-milking goats. They were from different breeds, such as Sanaan, Anglo-Nubian, Alpine and there were some beautiful multi-colored, regular goats.

I remember the many dogs we had. Some helped with looking after the goats, such as staying with them away from home all day. Others were very protective of us from strangers and other dogs. They all had funny names such as Buster, Bobby, Jannet, Shokay, Suzuki, and others.
I remember Buster never got along with the neighbor’s dog, Bruno. They fought almost once a week. They fought in the street and blocked lanes of traffic. I remember my red crossed-breed rooster also never got along with the same neighbor’s rooster. Just as Buster and Bruno, they also had bloody fights.

I remember my personal dogs. There was a German shepherd, cocker spaniel, hound, and some others. The German shepherd, Angel, was my show dog, black and tan. The cocker spaniel, Rambo, had long ears, long hair, and all black fur. The hound, Diana, was a beautiful brown and white short-haired dog.

I remember my macaw, a big blue and yellow parrot, Simon, who had a long blue tail. I remember his first word was my name, Harold. Simon had no other friend but me. He would climb over the fence and run across the street and attack anyone who stood between him and I. I remember his screams and cries when I left home without him. Simon made all my neighbors laugh.

I remember the Myna, a talking bird from India, but all I got him to say was his own name, Sam. Sam was all black with two yellow stripes that ran over his eyes from front to back.

I remember my two yellow headed parrots, their feathers were mostly green with multicolors on the underside of their wings. One of them lived together with a red squirrel, and they were best friends. The squirrel would sit on the parrot’s back and ride around the cage.

The other parrot hated adults being close to him. He would make loud, angry noises to get the adults away from him. But, he loved
children. The parrot would whistle and dance as long as there were children around.

I remember all the other birds I had, such as fruit-eating and seed-eating birds. I had Sempts, singing angels, very little green parakeets, some of which had yellow feathers on their heads and multiple colors under their wings. The females had blue feathers on their heads, and multiple colors under their wings. Most of the birds I remember are whistling birds.

I remember my baby Oscars, they grew to be about ten or eleven inches. Some were bright red and some had stripes. I remember my outdoor fish tank, which had a variety of fish. The gold fish would swim into my hands and let me play with them.

I remember the variety of fowls and ducks I had. The Bantam Fowl that had dark blue skin and white fury feathers. There were Rhode Island, Dominican, and larger chickens, white geese, Muscovy ducks, peeking ducks, and the regular ducks. Some were very tasty when cooked in curry sauce or gravy.

Many years after I came to New York, I had seven cats and a peach-colored love bird. I remember one of the cats tried to catch the bird for a meal. She got a good smack from me. After that, they became best of friends. They played together regularly.

I remember the death of some of my pets. I was around for some of them. Some went away from home and died after my many trips to the USA. I remember the dog that went away for two weeks. He did come back home, but he did not see me, so he went away and never came back again. The Macaw flew away and died. The German shepherd, Angel, got a heat-stroke and
died. The Oscars jumped out of the fish aquarium the day I came to New York.

Most of all I remember my two loving children, Kaitlyn and Darrien, and the unforgettable memories they gave me. I remember when my wife was pregnant with our daughter. I used to say, “Hush, little baby don’t say a word,” for the whole nine months. The morning she was born I sang the song for her, and she knew it was me. She started twisting her body and rolling her eyes. The nurses were amazed. They called her peanut because she was 4 pounds, 5 ounces, and 17 inches.

I remember my son, Darrien. I sang the same song to him. He was 5 pounds, 4 ounces, and 18 inches. When the nurse placed him on the table after the birth, he peed straight in her eyes. She said it was the first time in sixteen years that any baby had ever done that to her.

Just as I have loved and missed my beautiful pets, it is no different in the way I still love and miss and grieve the times with my two beautiful children. Just as I lost my pets when I left home, that’s the same way I lost my children when I came here.
WHERE I COME FROM (PUERTO RICO)

Miguel R.

The valley is green, the mountain greener,
Baby breath blanket, the ground I walked on.
Fruits were wild like the horses I rode,
Where the gray one instructed me how to respect Mother.

Mother takes care of you, if you love her—
She will also punish you, if you mistrust her domain.
So I ran and laughed in happiness, knowing
that I was always being looked after.

Sometimes I swam in her water—
Other times I fed from her trees.
How happy I was, compared to how sad I am.
Now I just miss my mother so much.

So far away, yet she is always near.
The days of happiness are lost but not forgotten,
And I really hope, with all my heart
To be once again in her arms.
WHERE I COME FROM by John R.

Where I come from, nobody wants to be. It’s a life of being moved around like a chess piece by someone you don’t know, wondering if this square is safe, or do I have to become a knight and be on the ready with sword in hand in case a conflict should arise? It’s not a normal life—it’s the life of a closed society, a life where one must be aware of their surroundings or else it’s game over, checkmate.

Where I come from has a smell that you first notice upon arrival, a disinfectant cleansing smell. That’s when you know you’re not in Kansas anymore. After some time goes by, you don’t even notice it anymore, it’s just the smell of the world you have to live in until your departure.

Where I come from you are told when to get up, when to go to bed, when to come out, when to lock in, when to eat, when to stop, when to go, when to sit, when to stand. Being told what to do becomes a part of your life—you start to do things before you’re told what to do.

Then there are times when you just say, The hell with you, and do whatever it is you want to do, or take matters into your own hands and deal with the consequences later, if you get caught.

Where I come from you have to try and read people to know where their head is at—a phone call or letter with news of a death or a break up could send someone over the edge. And you’ll become the victim of their wrath.
Where I come from you have to listen to the humming in the air to know if there is peace amongst the factions or if there is going to be a war because somebody violated another. Or where you go to the outside Rec and put your back to the wall because the tension in the air is thick like a foggy night, waiting for the first strike to know if it’s a one-on-one or an all-out war. Then you just wait for the gas to be dropped.

Where I come from friends are far and few. But there are people you associate with, people you hang out with, break bread with, people you stand up for if trouble should come their way, because they got your back if something comes your way.

Where I come from you have to watch what you say and do, because there are those who walk among you who like to be patted on the head by the overseers like a pet, for giving information.

Where I come from you don’t want to have any serious medical problems, because you get brushed off until you’re either taken out in an ambulance or by the meat-wagon.

Where I come from everybody wants out, but a lot can’t, and then there are those that count days on the street like guys crossing off days on a calendar to go see the parole board.

Where I come from one doesn’t have to be strong, just respected.

Where I come from there is some personnel—overseers, nurses, librarians, Rec supervisors, teachers, and others, not many but a few—who actually treat you like a human being, not a meal ticket.
Where I come from nobody wants to be, but journeys are taken and paths are walked down, paths that lead to where I come from.

Where I come from the light at the end of the tunnel keeps getting pushed back, so I always feel further away from where I want to be.

Where I want to be is where I came from.

Where I came from life wasn’t easy, but I could survive. That was over a quarter of a century ago.

Only a few friends and family have survived, but it would be real good to see them in the flesh.

Where I came from I would like to see once again, but first I have to get out of where I come from.
WHERE I’M FROM by Maurice N.

Where I’m from.
What does it mean?
   Does it mean where was I born, or
   Does it refer to the era of my social development?
Or could it mean both?
Juxtapose the two…
Born—in a house in Portsmouth, VA—the
era when a midwife was more valued than a doctor.
Born—in a house without modern sterile equipment, the
era when every female in the household held me
including my three-year old sister
before I was ever handed to my mother.
Being from VA, where fields were both my playground and the
source of food we consumed,
an era when you survived off the land,
a place of quietude, warmth, and affection,
in an era when warmth and affection never
extended beyond the threshold.
I’m from a place of peace and tranquility, if
such conditions can exist in a house full of women.
I’m from an era when these conditions were
alien also amongst men.
I’m from a place with fertile land,
an era when the land was just a place you
could stand on. Everything Black or White.
Wrong or Right.
They tell me this place no longer exists.
They tell me this era no longer exists.
But the house is still there. It’s been repainted.
It looks so much more attractive.
The era is there as well. It too has been repainted.
It too looks attractive.
This is where I’m from—VA.
Yes, Virginia! In Black and White.
LESS THAN A THOUSAND WORDS by Kelly M.

I met the love of my life while I was a patient on the psychiatric ward of Long Beach Memorial Hospital. She wasn’t a patient—I tried that once, and that’s a story of its own. Her name was Michele, and she was a nursing student doing a rotation through the ward. These are a few anecdotes of our love. I wouldn’t attempt to tell the whole story; I only hope you might feel it through what I tell.

I don’t own a single photograph, no record whatsoever of my past life, loves, joys, or sorrows, other than my memory. My lifestyle wouldn’t allow any memento to follow me. I moved too fast; the ride was too wild to save anything other than myself, so I write from memory.

Michele and I took a trip up to Angeles Crest National Forest, up in the mountains outside LA. Though we lived together, we didn’t have much time together, so the time we did have that was not strife-ridden, was special. We stopped at an official scenic spot. As we stood gazing at the view from the rocky cliffs to the valley below, surrounded by big pines, the forest suddenly fell silent, and a gentle snow began to fall. I felt the presence of something greater than myself, and was overcome by my love for the woman standing next to me. No photograph could’ve captured that moment. Nonetheless, I wish I had one.

A year later, on Thanksgiving Day, Michele had to work the three to eleven shift on the psychiatric ward where she worked as an R.N. now. Thanksgiving was her favorite holiday, and she had wanted to spend it with her family. She was sad, and I feigned a frosty indifference with, “That’s life, Michele. Maybe next year.”
She left for work, and I made a mad dash for the supermarket. It took me hours to defrost that damn turkey in the tub, running hot water over the remorseless, twenty-pound hunk of frozen meat, but I made it. When she walked in at 11:30, at the very end of Thanksgiving Day, I stood next to the dining room table, with a cat-that-ate-the-canary smile on my face, a candlelit feast upon the table.

She cried. No photograph could’ve captured that moment, either. Nevertheless, I wish I had one.

I recently heard, “Life in a Northern Town,” by The Dream Academy on the radio. It’s a pop-tune from the Eighties, so it’s not one you hear very often, and it broke my heart to hear it. The song itself has no special meaning to me, it’s just the first time I’d heard it.

Michele and I sat in her Toyota 4WD pickup truck. It was a beautiful, spring day in Southern California, and we were parked in the lot of an upscale marina, outside a restaurant where we had just finished dining.

“Why are you doing this, Kelly? I’m trying so hard!” You could see the hurt in her eyes, and I wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn’t come.

“I’m sorry. I completely forgot about it, but I really do have to be there.” I was lying. I didn’t have to be anywhere. My mistress, heroin, was calling me. If I ignored her, she would punish me.

“You’re lying. I know it. You know I know it. I don’t know what to do, Kelly. I almost wish it were another woman, but it’s not, and I don’t know how to fight this.”

I had no answer. I did not want to go. She had planned this day. It was supposed to be special, a reconciliation, forgiveness, another chance, after so many. “Life in a Northern
Town” came on the radio, and I remember thinking it was a pretty song, nothing more.

It’s been thirty-six years since that day in the parking lot of that marina, sailboats gliding across the water. After many relationships, a marriage to another wonderful girl, a subsequent divorce, and I still love her. She fought so valiantly for my love. She never knew she always had it.

For the first time, I listened to the lyrics of “Life in a Northern Town.” It’s a sad song. Of course it is. I don’t want a photograph. Nevertheless, I wish…
LOST CONTROL by Louis Z.

On a cold winter's day I was driving home from a party and the road covered with ice.

My car began to spin and I lost control of my car.

*Will I get seriously hurt?*

I was totally afraid for my life and was responding by instinct only.

*Will this be my last feeling, fear?*

The road was a sheet of ice and I was driving at 50 MPH, which I thought was a safe speed to go by.

*Was I wrong?*

I was totally surprised when the car was heading off the road and all I could do was try to stop the car from spinning further on the ice. I prayed for help. I wonder if God heard my plea, for I was saved by coming across a dry patch of road and my car stopped spinning, and like a miracle I was again in control.

I was a nervous mess and in fear for what might have happened.

*Did I get lucky or was God looking over me?*

I will never know for sure, but I will accept that I was saved.

I was one complete set of nerves and fear for what might have happened. This did provide me with a real life learning experience and I vowed to never drive on an icy road ever again. Life is filled with surprises, is it not?

I owe my thanks to God, for this was under his control.

*Or am I dreaming?*
AN APOLOGY by Ben A.

I never told anybody
because I was afraid.
Mostly, I wanted to forget,
running far away from a nightmare.
But unlike a nightmare,
relief doesn’t come.
No one can say, “It was only a bad dream.”
Only stark reality remains.
The deed done.
It is etched in bold, in the annals of time,
and defines me always.

I never told anybody,
because I couldn’t do it justice.
I couldn’t put into words, which would only understate
those feelings of sparkling joy you exuded.
The beautiful way that you were.
Somewhere, in the vast canvass of time and space,
you occupy a pleasant corner in my own remembrances,
and when my mind chances at calm and comfort,
I can see the masterpiece I couldn’t.
I am so blessed
for having known your love and care.

I never told anybody.
But, I’m telling you now,
wherever you are:
I am so sorry.
Please forgive me.
I love you.
MADRE MIA QUIERO UN FAVOR by Miguel R.

Madre mia quiero un favor
Sera el ultimo que te pida
Que me perdones el dolor
Que te he causado en tu Vida

Perdoname Madre mia
Por lo que ha sucedido
por elegir un camino
sin futuro, sin destino

Mi destino es como un coco
que se cansa de su Palma
y cai al suelo sobiendo
Que al diable vendio su alma

Yo elegi ese camino
Pero quiero que tu sepas
Que en mis momentos de paz
Tu alma esta con mi alma

Y si algun dia me faltas
Quiero que sepas una cosa
Que en la muerte en contraras Paz
Como en vida, tuuiste dolor
Como el que te cause yo
Y esto dire yo en to fosa

Aquí esta un Madre buena
Buena y dulce de Verdad
Munio por el dolor Causado
Por su higo y su Maldad
DEAR GOD, by Maurice N.

I’m hoping this letter finds You in one of Your more Merciful moods. I’m hearing that you can be very wrathful when humans piss You off. So I’ll try to keep to Your good side. By doing so I pray that You grant the request I’m about to propose.

If it isn’t asking too much, could You please bestow Your Mercy, Grace, and Forgiveness upon my mom for any misdeed or sin that she may have committed?

You see (of course You do—You’re all-seeing and all-knowing, right?) my mother left this earthly abode 5 years ago as You know but may have temporarily forgotten due to Your busy schedule.

As You are aware, but may have forgotten, she has certain quirks that make her perceive some situations and rules uniquely, or as a matter of interpretation. Her interpretation.

Such as feeling no responsibility for severing her older brother’s toes with an axe (only 3 of them). She claims it was an accident. She was really aiming for his head. I believe her.

Or when she says she only scratched her white school-mates arm to see if it was the same color. But only after and because her school-mate proclaimed that she was different, thereby implying that she was better. In my mother’s defense, she always expressed genuine remorse when talking about this story.

And the time she forgot to correct the matter with the cashier that under-charged her at the grocery store. She said she would do so
the following day, but forgot. Then she forgot again, and again, and again. In her defense, she only forgot because she found a shorter route home that didn’t pass by that particular store.

My mom also has a certain tendency to tell the truth when asked a question. A virtue that Your Highness has blessed her with. However, this tendency may be somewhat trying for someone like Yourself, whom I can imagine is very busy. One who has other matters to attend to should form any questions to require a simple yes or no response. To do otherwise would need the patience of Job to endure.

As You can see, she really is a good person who is really trying to be heard and understood. Well, at least to be heard.

Therefore, I pray that You give her the utmost compassion and consider that after all, You did create her.

In closing, I thank you for any consideration that can be given her.

But please, I beg of You, do not let her know that I have written. Believe me, I would rather feel Your wrath than hers.

Sincerely,
Maurice

P.S. I was just being facetious about the wrath remark! Ha! Ha!
My name is Bobby Books, and I’ve got a tale to tell. It happened one day, daydreaming about a pint of ale.

As life would have it, I was picking up some books I had received, when all of a sudden the top one decided to jump free. As my hand shot out to retrieve it, all the other books screamed, “We’re free!”

I watched them sail through the air at different lengths and different heights. But the only thing on my mind was that pint of ale when I was free one night.

The sound that the books made when they hit the floor was a sound to behold, because I was in a library and it was only a quarter to four.

Heads turned and stared at me, some with question, some with glee, and then there were those whose look said, “Why are you bothering me?”

As I surrendered my hands to the air, I shrugged and said with a plea, “I am deeply sorry, but the books just wanted to be free.” Some laughed and some snickered, and other just shook their heads at me. But the way the old one looked at me had me twitching to go take a pee.

As I knelt down to retrieve the books, something stung me like a bee. It was when the books were hitting the floor—it sounded like music to me. So I stood, staring at the books. No, that couldn’t be. But I had to try it again or else it will keep bothering me.

So I gathered up some books of different weights and different sizes and jumped up on a chair and said with a cheerful cry, “My friends, I have just discovered, to my surprise, that these books can make music when dropped at different times.”
Some looked at me curiously, some just stared, and others were wide-eyed. I guess they thought I was mad.

So I lifted a book high over my head and bowed to the people on my right and my left. I started tossing books all around until they were all set free. I threw some high, I threw some low, I threw some politely. I tossed some long, and I tossed some short. I tossed some at my feet. The books were flying all around towards the floor they would soon meet.

As the sound of the books subsided, I slowly opened my eyes. Yes, I did hear music, and I felt all giddy inside. I thought that with a little practice I’d be able to get it right, because that last toss sounded like Hendrix, “Purple Haze”. What a delight.

I heard some clapping. I heard some moans. I heard the scraping of chairs. When I lifted my head to look at the men, it wasn’t as bad as I feared. Some smiled and winked, some just stared at me weird. The old man with the gravelly voice, well he just leered. “Bobby, I never thought of you to be crazy, but after this I think you’re nuts. Tossing books to make music? What’s next, a dancing brush?

“Well you might not have heard it, but the others, I can see they have. It’s probably because you’re not wearing your hearing aid, so your hearing is partially impaired.” He rumbled a grumble then shook his head, but instead of arguing, he just turned to read.

Then some guys walked over and one of them approached. “Bobby, we heard it. Oh yes, we did, because the music is still ringing inside our heads. Books making music is something new. We’d like to join your band if it’s okay with you.”

I stared at the one, then over at the other three. “Well, I’m not really sure how this works, but if you’re serious, go grab some books and let’s get to work.”
So we gathered up some books of different shapes and sizes and took up positions, not too close, yet not that far. Steve climbed onto a shelf. Tommy was on a table. Danny jumped on a desk, and Willy was in a window.

As I got up on a table, I turned to look at the four. They were all full of smiles with books bumbling in their arms. I smiled back at them, then held up a book. “You saw how I did it, dropping them low, high, and wide. Well, let’s do it together, just at different times.”

A nod and a toss was all it took, and the sound of the music had me shook. When the last book was dropped and the music faded away, we smiled at each other when somebody said, “Did you hear what I heard? The song was just played, that was ‘Hotel California’! This is insane!”

That’s when we heard it, the steady tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. I never thought a foot could ever move that fast. But there stood Ms. Oh! That song might be our last.

Her eyebrows were scrunched and her eyes held a cool stare. Her mouth, a straight line. Wow, was she mad. “Are you men crazy? What’s the meaning of this? Come down from where you are. This, I insist!”

“Please Ms. Oh, give me a moment to explain. The boys and I can play music, if you’ll just give us a chance to play. We’re Bobby Books and the Volumes, musicians extraordinaire. When we start dropping books, it’ll be music to your ears.”

With her mouth agape and her eyes as big as saucers, we could see she was stuck on what to say. But that second was gone and with that came scorn, as she proceeded to say, “Bobby, I like you. This I think you know. But what you just said doesn’t ring any bells in my head, and it all sounds pretty crazy to me.”

“Just give us one chance, that’s all that we ask, for we know that our song will ring true in your soul.”
She looked me in the eyes, then gave a sigh and proceeded to walk to her counter. She fussed with some papers, and shuffled some books, but still hadn’t said a word. We looked at each other and were about to step down when she said, “You have this one time, to make your books rhyme, and then I will hear of it no more, because if I do, you’ll be off to the SHU!”

So we scurried and scrambled, grabbing as many books we could handle and hoped that it was enough. Because with Ms. Oh in the loop, she could manage the group, and be our passport to fame and fortune…

The drop of one book was all that it took for the sweet music to fill the air. We danced as we threw; it just felt good to do, and some of the men started to sway. As the vibe filled the room, I saw Ms. Oh swoon with that smile we all admire.

The music played on, and when it was gone some of the men started clapping. We looked at Ms. Oh and saw her face was aglow and knew right then that we had her.

“I couldn’t believe it at first. In fact I thought it absurd, but tell me, was that Guns N’ Roses I just heard?”

“Yes, Ms. Oh, ‘Paradise City’ is what we composed. But we still need to practice some more, so we can make up a set list and tour. So, we’ll need your help with things. We were hoping you could pull a few strings?”

“I’m making no promises to you, but I will see what I can do.”

“Thank you, Ms. Oh, that’s all we ask, because once they hear our book music, this thing’s going to spread like a rash.”

That was a couple of years ago when we first took that step. With Ms. Oh at the helm, she took care of the rest. In the beginning It
was slow because people didn’t believe, but once they came and saw us, they were screaming, “Encore, please!”

Ms. Oh is part of the group and she even does a couple of solos. I think if she gets any better she might just go dolo.

So we’re back on tour, doing our new release, heading for the west coast to the Playboy mansion—what a treat!

As I sit here by the window, admiring this lovely view, I start thinking back about the pint of ale, because without it I wouldn’t have a tale to tell you.
I am king too, you know. I know I am, because my ever-smiling, painted face is that of a king, with a crown up on my head. In my upper-right corner is a painted heart, as is in my lower-left corner, but that one’s upside down. We live in a place called Chance, and the King of Chance takes me out of the box, winds me up, and I do tricks for him. I used to do so many tricks!

Sometimes, the King of Chance would not be happy with my tricks, and he would bang me on the floor. One day, one of my legs broke completely off! Now, all that’s left of my other leg is a stiff piece of wire that goes round and round when he winds me up. I still try to do tricks for him, but mostly I just go round in circles now, and the King of Chance laughs and claps his hands. He doesn’t bang me on the floor anymore, but I don’t really care all that much.

I was happy and in love once, you see. She was a queen. I know she was a queen, because her ever-smiling, painted face was that of a queen with a crown upon her head, as well, and she was my queen. I know she was mine, because she had the same two painted hearts in her corners, just like I did. We used to lie snuggled against each other in the box at night, when the King of Chance was asleep. We were so happy then, safe and cuddled together, as the King of Chance slept.

Then one day she wouldn’t wind up anymore. The King of Chance cried and cried, and he banged her on the floor harder than ever, and she broke apart. The last thing I remember was her smiling face looking at me, but I swear there were tears in her
eyes, and they were for me. Then the Big Ones came, and they took her away, and I haven’t seen her since.

That was a long time ago. These days, I lie in the box alone at night, and I miss her so much. I still love her. I didn’t care if she was broken. I will always love her. I will always love. The King of Chance will never understand this, of course, but I have to love. After all, I am the King of Hearts.
Henrick and Helga were born and raised in France. They met after High School; it was love at first sight. They dated a short time and then married. Helga wanted a child and Henrick could have cared less. Helga was a loving and nurturing woman who saw so much potential in Henrick despite his flaws. Henrick had a good sense of humor and made Helga smile and laugh. But Henrick could be crude and miserable, and he was for most of the time.

After a few months of marriage, Helga became pregnant and wanted to know the sex of their child. The ultrasound determined that they were going to have a boy, but there was something different that the doctor picked up on but thought wasn’t important enough to mention at the time.

When Helga’s water broke, she was brought to the hospital in the evening and was in labor for close to ten hours. Henrick popped in and out of the room to check on his wife’s progress—he was tired and yawned a lot and fell asleep in the chair next to Helga’s bed. Henrick awoke dazed from all the activities of the birth of his son. He looked at his shriveled raisin-looking son and said, “That’s nice,” and fell back to sleep. The next morning, when Helga was nursing the boy, the doctor came around to check on his patient and to ask Helga is there was any family history.

“What family history?” said Helga. “What are you talking about?”

The doctor replied, “Helga, haven’t you noticed? Don’t you see? Your son is a dwarf.” [author’s note: Today we use the term ‘little person’ or ‘little people’ as not to offend.]

Helga detached her hungry son from her nipple and held him up, and sure enough he looked like a wrinkled eggplant with
small arms and hands, small legs and feet. Helga loved her son and wondered if Henrick was awake enough to even notice. I'm 4'11", and he’s 6'3", she thought. Henrick is going to blame me for this, for sure.

Sure enough when Henrick showed up at noon at the hospital and went to Helga’s room, he said, “Helga, what happened, did someone switch babies on us? What the hell is that?”

Helga said, “This is our son. He’s a dwarf. I mean, little person.”

Henrick said, “This is all your fault, Helga. What are we supposed to do with him? Use him for a doorstop!? In fact, I’ve got just the name for him—we’re calling him Napoleon,”

“That’s fine with me,” Helga replied. “Henrick, meet your son, Napoleon.”

Helga did some family research on both sides and discovered that Henrick’s Great-great-great-grandfather was a dwarf, and that the gene had been repressed for generations until now. When Henrick found out he started to drink and drink heavily.

As the years passed Napoleon became an A student who got along with everyone and helped tutor those who asked him for help. Of course, there were always the envious ones and the bullies, but Napoleon wouldn’t allow himself to be bullied; besides, he had too many friends who wouldn’t let that happen to him. In time Napoleon would be tutoring the bullies too. You see, it’s not what you see of a person, it’s what you see in a person. Don’t judge a book by its cover.

Napoleon fell in love with basketball and would practice dribbling in the driveway at all hours of the day. He became obsessed with the sport and read everything he could—the
history, the strategies, and all the rules. He absorbed all this information like a hungry sponge.

For Napoleon’s 12th birthday, Helga bought and installed a 7’ basketball hoop so that Napoleon could practice shooting baskets. She even measured out the proportioned distance for a foul-shooting like so he could practice foul shots. Napoleon hugged and kissed his mother on the cheek and said, “This is the best present ever, thank you Mama.”

“Happy Birthday, son,” she said.

When Henrick came home from work after stopping at the bar, he said, “Hey, Napoleon, what do you think you’re going to do, come dribbling down the driveway and take off in flight like Dr. J (Julius Erving) and slam-dunk the ball? I know! You can be Dr. Z for zero because that’s the chance you’re gonna have in basketball. Give it up, half-pint.”

Napoleon thought of the song “Cat’s in the Cradle” and changed a couple of words and sang to himself, “I don’t want to be like him, no, I’m never gonna be like him.”

Over time, Napoleon was becoming a basketball genius. He knew he could never make it as a player, but he wanted to be a basketball coach. Not just any coach, but the greatest. Not to prove anything to anybody, but just because he loved the game.

Helga watched her son become very quiet at home. She also noticed Henrick was drinking more and had become verbally abusive toward her and Napoleon. She had enough! Helga and Henrick divorced. Helga and Napoleon got the house in the settlement and Henrick took a room at a run down boarding house. After the divorce, Napoleon became himself again.

Napoleon got a job with the basketball team as a towel boy, went to every practice and game, studied, and learned all the plays in the playbook in a single night. His High School team
was in contention to go to the European finals if they could win their last six games.

One night, the coach and assistant coach got thrown out of the game for foul language and the coach threw a chair across the floor out of frustration. The team was down fifteen points going into the half. The referee came over to the team and said, “Looks like you don’t have a coach. You’re going to have to forfeit.”

Hearing this, Napoleon threw down the towels and walked right up to the ref’s hip and said, “I’m the coach now.”

The referee laughed and said, “Sure, kid. Who do you think you are? Napoleon or something?”

Napoleon responded, “I sure am.”

The referees conferred and decided that Napoleon was, after all, a member of the team (albeit the towel boy), so they let him stand in for the coach.

Napoleon knew the talent he had on the team, so he tweaked some plays and rallied his team in the locker room. They came out the second half and rallied and won the game by ten points. In the mean time, the coach and assistant coach were suspended for the rest of the season, until the playoffs (if they made it that far). Napoleon got them to the finals by winning the remainder of the games. With Napoleon’s recommendations to the coaches, his team won the European High School Championship.

Word spread about Napoleon’s accomplishments as a coach and he was highly sought-after as a college coach. With a letter of recommendation from his high school coach, Napoleon could pick and choose which college he would attend. He wanted a challenge so he picked a college with a mediocre basketball team and promised the Dean that he could deliver a championship within two years. He also wanted to choose his
own coaching staff and do his own recruiting. Napoleon said that, “If I can’t deliver for you within two years, then you don’t have to pay me.”

The Dean accepted the challenge, figuring that he could save the school 200,000 euros per year. To the dean’s chagrin and pleasure, Napoleon brought the college a title in the first year. This brought more revenue to the school because more people wanted to attend a winning school. Also, the school received TV revenue, thanks to Napoleon’s masterful coaching.

Napoleon was sought-after by the pros after winning five straight championships and generating several million in Euros to the college’s endowment. Napoleon was also being paid 750,000 Euros for the last two years of his contract, but it wasn’t about the money. It was about the challenge. He accomplished what he set out to do and now it was time to move on, to move onto the next great challenge: the pros.

Napoleon spent the next 25 years winning 20 of 25 European Championships for Germany (6), Italy (4), and France (10). He was now the G.O.A.T.

Henrick admired and was proud of his son, collecting every write-up and sports article he could find. He collected Napoleon-themed memorabilia like hats, Jerseys, bobble-heads. You name it, Henrick collected it and preserved it for his son’s future Hall of Fame induction.

Pierre, the owner and bartender that Henrick frequented had expanded his establishment into a restaurant, then a catering service, and finally a banquet hall. Pierre took a chance on Henrick and told him, “My friend, if you get yourself sobered up, I’ll give you a management job right here with me. Henrick thought about this and figured, “What do I have to lose? I’ll do it.”
Helga, who lived in Napoleon’s mansion, had all the time and money she could have ever dreamed of, but money can’t buy happiness, and she missed her true love, Henrick. Helga found out about Henrick’s rehabilitation and new job at Pierre’s Banquet Hall. She decided to visit him at work. When the hostess brought Helga to Henrick’s office and their eyes met, it was love at first sight all over again. In time, the two of them reconciled their hurt and anger and abandonment. They began dating again.

Helga didn’t tell Napoleon that she had gotten back together with his father, because she didn’t want him distracted from his career.

Napoleon got word that his old High School coach was going to retire and he wanted to surprise Mr. Lebeau at his retirement dinner, which was being held at Pierre’s Banquet Hall. When Napoleon arrived unannounced with his entourage, Coach Lebeau was so overwhelmed that he was practically speechless with tears of joy and admiration running down his cheeks. The two men sat and shared stories until the retirement party ended. Napoleon had replicas of all the rings that he had won over all the years of coaching and presented them to his mentor and friend, Coach Lebeau, saying “Thank you for believing in me, Coach. You were always with me.”

Helga didn’t know that Napoleon would be present at the dinner, as she was planning on coming as a gesture of thanks for Napoleon. Helga told her son that she and his father were dating again and that his father was the manager here and that he had quit drinking. Napoleon was pleased for his mother that she was once again happy.

As the Banquet hall was closing up and all the party-goers were leaving, Henrick was bidding everyone good night. When Napoleon and his entourage approached the door, he stood
up straight and tall. Napoleon saw his father at the door, and as he passed by, his father said, “Have a good night. I’m proud of you, son.”

Napoleon looked up and said, “You know what, Papa, you make one hell of a doorstop!” And he walked out. This reconciliation was going to take time. But that’s another story.
One bright and sunny tropical Sunday morning—roosters crowing, hens clucking, goats bleating—a father and his teenage son headed out with their vehicle down Tasker road to cut grass to feed their animals. The father’s family car was a beautiful, blue Vauxhall Viva. As they drove through the yellow gravel road, they turned off onto an old dirt road. They drove through bushes, trees, sugar cane fields, and even over ravens in order to get to where the very green, healthy, juicy grass grew.

Twenty-five miles away from where the father and son collected grass in the sun, Some of their relatives were having trouble with their car. These relatives eventually drove to the home of the father and son to get their help, but they couldn’t find them there. The wife and mother of the father and son told the relatives where they were, and they drove down the Tasker road, then the dirt road, where they found the man and his son cutting the grass.

After a long time repairing the relatives vehicle, the boy’s father told the boy to return the battery that they used to help repair the vehicle. As they boy was putting the battery into the Viva, the relative in the other car reversed and made a turn, striking the boy and pinning him between the bumpers of both vehicles. The boy screamed. The father ran and caught his son, preventing him from hitting his head on a concrete pillar that could have killed him.

This incident happened about forty-eight years ago, and the young boy is now sixty-four years old, and I still have a numbness behind my left knee from this years old story. The day that went from sunshine to gloom.
OUR FATHER’S NAME by Miguel R.

I have my father’s name, my son has mine. All three are first born, but never last. We are Archangels in our hearts, until our Lord calls us to pass.

My father is gone, yet he is here, for names have power in Santeria. And when I feel I’m going insane, I always remember my father’s name.

I hope to God and all the Saints, to guard my namesake from evil Hades. And if he thinks to do something bad, I hope he stops, I hope he thinks about his namesake; His Dad
THE CLIFF by Ben A.

Shari was from Oz—the land down under. She was some daredevil too. I think being so daring had a lot to do with her mother dying when Shari was only fourteen. It was almost like she had a death wish after that. Before her mother’s death, she’d been a tennis prodigy: ranked 40th in the world on the junior circuit. Afterwards, though, the tennis world pretty much faded into after-thought.

So, she took up rock climbing. She and her brother did all sorts of dangerous climbs free-hand, probably somewhere in the outback outside of Melbourne, where she’s from. They even climbed at night.

I met Shari in an acting class back at the City College of San Francisco. She was eighteen by then, and along with rock-climbing she loved to travel and try out new things. It was summertime in the Bay Area, and I didn’t feel much like working. I decided to milk my unemployment awhile longer and found myself in said acting class with a bunch of college kids half my age. Most were free spirits, and it was a lot of fun.

One day after class, Shari and I drove out to the Cliff House for a late lunch. The Cliff House is this iconic San Francisco landmark perched on a promontory overlooking the Pacific at the north end of Ocean Beach. You could probably call it a kind of old-fashioned mall, the Cliff House, complete with restaurants, tourist shops, and a functioning old-time penny arcade (not costing a penny though). It’s also where Mark Twain famously said, “…the coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco.” But this wasn’t one of those crazy weather days. It was 80 degrees. A cool ocean spray rode an easy west wind, blending with the sound of seals barking on the beach.
After lunch, we traipsed on down to the beach and meandered south. The vast Pacific Ocean was to our right and the Great Highway ran atop the 80-foot cliffs to our left. Suddenly, Shari bolted stage left, jerking me toward the cliffs.

“C’mon, Mate!” She yelled. “This’ll be heaps of fun!”

“What the…?” I stammered, as I saw her ambling—bounding even—toward and up a straight-up rock face. Quite insane, I thought to myself. She’d been trying to get me to go skydiving with her but I had flatly refused. In the back of my head I wondered now if this rock-climb was some form of get-back.

I walked toward the cliff as I watched her climb; a couple of thoughts ran quickly through my head, namely: to do or not to do? That was the question. In about fifteen seconds, or the time it took me to reach the base of the cliff, my mind raced through a full-fledged debate.

My rational self immediately put up a strong argument: C’mon, you’re not dressed for this. You’ve got pretty stiff blue jeans on and Red Wing work boots. Oh sure, Red Wings are ‘like walking on air’ (as the advertisement said) and were great for your previous job at a fast-paced bakery. But you’re not making Danish or croissants here.

The irrational part of me countered with: Look, blue jeans can stretch. And your Red Wings? Well they have non-slip soles. C’mon, you’ll be alright.

And then, my irrational self—semi love-struck and hopeless romantic that he was—didn’t even wait for a rational rebuttal. He went and threw my ego into the fray. Just think about how you’d feel if you didn’t go up that cliff. You’d know that she’d know what a real wimp you are.

Before I knew it, I was climbing.
I’d half-forgotten that I was deathly afraid of heights—acrophobia on steroids. I get dizzy, my palms sweaty, standing on a six foot ladder.

So, at least initially, I was fueled by the irrational need to protect my ego. But, in actuality, I became pleasantly surprised. There were endless cracks and fissures in the rock. I could get my fingers and a bit more than just the tips of my boots in them. Hey, I was climbing! Was I scared? Maybe only a little at this point. I was concentrating so hard that I couldn’t pay much attention to my fear. I was feeling, dare I say it, kind of confident.

I was about half way when I looked up. Shari had already made it to the top. I kept going, almost methodically; those Red Wings, believe it or not, were coming through like a champ.

But one of the things I learned that day, on that climb, was that any lapse of concentration is potentially dangerous, and obviously potentially fatal. I’m talking about feelings that just sort of creep up on you.

I suddenly could feel that I was high up. I knew I was well past the point of no return. I mean I couldn’t return to the beach at this point, not safely anyway. That momentary feeling of being high-up caused me to break a cardinal rule—especially if you were some novice rock climber with severe acrophobia: Never Look Down!

But that’s just what I did. I was only about fifteen feet from the top, and, silly me, I just had to look down! And then I couldn’t move. I hugged the rock face. My hands began to sweat. I was on the edge of full-blown panic.

Stuff flashed through my mind. Fire Department? Then, maybe if I could gain enough purchase, just maybe I could jump straight out far enough, thereby avoiding the rocks directly
below and landing on the relatively soft sand. I was about 65 feet up, and maybe I could get away with just a busted leg.

Great... I though sarcastically. A small crowd had gathered below to watch the humiliating spectacle. Then, I heard Shari’s voice from above.

“Know exactly where you’re going to put each hand and foot. One at a time, and slowly.”

They were calming and encouraging words—they motivated me to concentrate. I forgot my fear. In a few minutes we both sat atop the ledge, leaning back against the concrete divider that separated the Great Highway, the sun sinking lower toward the Pacific.
Everyday on my way to work I would pass a man who called himself the son of God. He would preach and read scriptures from the Bible from 6 AM to 6 PM. I used to just walk on by him, thinking he was just a nut fallen from the tree of life, and then I’d go catch my train.

Then, one night I had gotten a phone call from my mother telling me my grandmother was in the hospital and it didn’t look good. I was pretty close to her and loved her very much. This news left a dark cloud over me. On my way to work the next day the voice of the man who called himself the son of God snatched me out of my cloud. So, I stopped at a distance and listened to him speak. When he took a break for a drink, I walked up to him.

“Sir,” I said, “you call yourself the son of God. Do you think you can do me a favor and say a prayer for my grandmother? She is very ill and it doesn’t look like she has much time left.”

He smiled down at me. “What is your name?”

“John.”

“Well, John, how about we pray together? What is your grandmother’s name?”

“Sir, I don’t know how to pray. That’s why I asked you. Her name is Marie. She’s a good woman, and religious.”

“John, you can pray. Just think of God our father and we’ll ask him for his blessings and help together.”

So, I repeated what he said and added a couple of other things. I thanked him and handed him ten bucks, but he shook his head at me. “I don’t want your money, John. Just start praying for your grandmother. Remember, God loves you, John.”

He smiled at me and I went to do catch my train.
As the days went by, I’d pass him on my way to work, and would nod and give him a smile. Then, one morning as I was passing he said, “John, I had a dream and your grandmother is going to be alright.” I stopped and stared for a second, nodded, and then went for my train. I thought nothing of it until a day later when my sister called and told me, “Granny’s alright. She’ll be coming home as early as next week.”

The next day, I stopped to talk to this man who called himself the son of God. I wanted to know how he knew.

“Sir,” I said, “how did you know about my grandmother? Were you just saying it to lift my mood? Or are you like one of those guys from the Bible?”

“I’m not a prophet, John. I just had a dream of an old woman and the doctor called her Marie. So I took it to be your grandmother. From how you’re acting, I take it she’s going to be alright?”

“Yes, she is. Thank you for what you have done.”

“I didn’t do anything. God did it. We just asked for His help, John.” I stared at him, then down at the book in his hands.

“John, I understand what you’re saying, but God lets us choose how we want to live…” he says as he holds up the bible. “We can live like He wants us to live or not. It’s our choice. But he does love us regardless of our choice.”

“Why did he let Eve give Adam the apple?”

He smiled.

“Adam made the choice to eat it, and that’s why the world is the way it is now. And why women suffer the pain of giving birth.”

“OK. Why would He send His Son down to earth just to be tortured and killed in a horrible death? I don’t think I could ever do that if I had a kid. Could you?”

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“I have no children, so I can’t give you an answer. But his Son, Jesus, was sent here to die for the sins of all mankind. It’s prophesied in the old testament, and Jesus talks about it in the new testament. John, if you like I’ll give you a bible and show you where to read?”

I was getting ticked with this conversation. “Son of God, what does that mean? Who are you to call yourself a son of God? Ahhh!” And I gave him a dismissive hand and walked off.

For the next few days I just walked by him as if he wasn’t there, but then one day he wasn’t. The next day he didn’t show up either, so I started to wonder if he was alright. That week he never showed up and for some reason it seemed to be a weight on my shoulders. He didn’t show up the following week either.

That weekend, as I was on my way to the bakery for some rolls, I heard the church bells ringing. I stopped and listened and thought about the son of God, was he alright, or did he just change his location? When I left the bakery I passed by the book store and stopped, backed up, and went in. Why I was in there I did not know, so I just browsed around, checking out the books. Then I came across the religious section, picked up a bible, and started flipping through the pages. Next thing I knew I was at the counter paying for it. Why was I doing this?

After I finished my lunch I sat in my lazy-boy staring at the book. I hadn’t touched one since probably eighth grade. Maybe I was afraid to open it, I don’t know. But I began to read.

About a month had passed when one morning on my way to work the son of God returned. I stopped to talk to him, asking if he was ok, where he’d been. He told me his mother had gotten sick, that he’d needed to be with her, and that she was a lot better now. After that was out of the way, I said to him, “I
need to apologize to you for the way I acted the last time we talked. I had no business to treat you that way.”

“It’s OK, John. You were a little upset because I couldn’t explain why your grandmother got better. It’s just the way God works. He does things that we just can’t explain why or how.”

“I kind of understand that now. I’ve been reading the bible. I had also asked you a question before I walked off—I found my answer. We are all sons and daughters of God. God created the first man and woman, so we’re all descendants from Adam. I want to thank you, son of God, for steering me back onto a road long forgotten.”

“You don’t have to thank me John.”
I was posed the question, “If I could ask God twenty questions, what would they be?” I could really only come up with eight, the first one being, obviously, “Is there a God?” If I happened to get an answer to that one, it would be followed by, “Who am I, and why am I here? Because I don’t really get it.” The next relates to how important we might be, (and hence myself), and it is, “Are we really just ridiculously intelligent hairless apes, or are we the Sentience of the Universe?” The next kind of depends on the answer to that one: “Well, then are we alone?” Not wanting to push my luck with the “life after death” question, I would ask, “Will at least our love survive my death?” After that, I want an answer to some of the things that trouble me about this experience called life, primarily, “Why do we suffer, and why do we make each other suffer?” That one is sort of a blanket question for all of the crap that goes on here, from cancer, to war, to broken hearts.

So I asked my questions, as I sat meditating one day. Guess what the reply was? Silence, as usual. The bastard doesn’t talk very much. So I decided to write myself a letter, a long time into the future. Since it’s me, and I should be pretty concerned about me, maybe I’ll be a bit more responsive.

Being that I am incarcerated, and growing old, but getting out in two years, I had a question that actually could be answered, regarding a rumor I had heard in here, namely, that in the event our death in prison, our gravestones are inscribed with our DIN (Departmental Identification Number), and we would be stuck with them for all eternity. Not only that, but they stack us three high (or is it low), so we’re forever tripled-bunked after we die. So, I asked our librarian, Ms. Orlando, a living person in the present with access to that sort of information, if it were true.
The unpropitious response was a dismal, “Yes,” so one of the questions I have for myself is obvious. Anyway, here it goes:

Dear Kelly,

Well, it’s been about 300 years since we last spoke, and I was wondering how you’re doing these days. Do you still play bass guitar, and have you gotten much better at it? Did you wind up stuck with that DIN number, or did you dodge that bullet? Did our love survive? What’s it like where you are anyway? Is it hot and muggy there, or a dry heat? Any new love interests in your life? Hmm...Well, I guess that question doesn’t have an ending, does it? (I was afraid to ask the Big Guy). Get back to me if you can. I’d really love hearing from you. Really.

Yours Truly,
Kelly

P.S. Any good stock tips?

Nothing yet, but I’m still waiting on a response.

Maybe tomorrow?

Then my whole world turned upside down. You’re never going to believe this, but yesterday, I got an answer in the mail! I swear it! Postmarked August 27, 2322, and this was my reply:

Hey Kelly!

What’s up? You can’t imagine my surprise hearing from you after so long. Unfortunately, I can’t answer many of your questions, because they came up with a cure for death, about ten years from then, so I’m still alive! So, yes, we did dodge that bullet. We now live in Arizona, so it’s hot and dry here, and as for love interests,
I married Jenifer Aniston and she still looks twenty-five, even as she approaches her 350th birthday. Oh, and time-travel is now a reality, but it’s against the law, so don’t tell anyone I answered you. We wouldn’t want to have to dodge that bullet twice, would we?

Yours Truly,
Kelly
P.S. Invest in pharmaceuticals; the cure for death isn’t cheap!

What makes it all worthwhile? Well, this is my answer, and it’s the real thing, folks. Old men are supposed to be wise, and since I’m three hundred and sixty-three, you might want to take note of it: Loving, laughing, learning, and legacy. As Jewel says in her song, “Hands,”: In the end, only kindness matters.

Me Truly,
Kelly
In the late sixties and early seventies, my friend Smokey and I were growing up in a small town, Princess Town, in Trinidad. Smokey lived in an old wooden two-bedroom house with his parents, three sisters, and two brothers. Smokey always told me about scary things that happened in their home. Smokey also lived in three different homes on the same street, and he was too young to understand why they had to move. Whenever he told me about the scary things he always seemed frightened from what was happening. At times I saw the fright in his face and also heard it in his shaky voice, which changed from a light tone to a want-to-cry tone. Smokey also had lots of questions, such as…

Why is this happening to us? What’s wrong with these houses? Why did we have to live there?

Smokey told me about a friend named Boyer who lived in another small town who also worked next door to where they lived. Why did we hear Boyer knocking and calling me at night when he wasn’t there? Was my mom pretending or was she really brave when she opened the door when Boyer called?

Once, Smokey’s dad was taking a bath on the outside, behind the house, when his dad yelled for Smokey to bring him a towel. As Smokey turned around to go and get the towel, he saw his dad entering his room holding a towel, but this was not his dad. His dad called a second time from the back yard asking for the towel. Why did this happen? Why are these things so scary? Why did the window fling wide open when it was locked tight?
His father’s co-worker called him at 3:00 AM instead of 5:00 AM. They always traveled to work at 5:00 AM. When his dad opened the door, he said he saw a tall, shadowy figure at the door. Then their dog, Buster, chased the thing all the way behind the house, through the fruit trees and vegetable garden, into a large patch of bamboo. Why are these scary things happening to us, Smokey would ask. Is it only our home? If we move will this thing follow us? Will my parents call a priest? When will it stop?

Many years passed, and Smokey got married and moved into his own apartment, not too far away, but whenever we would meet, he always told me of the fear he still felt.

Out of all of Smokey’s questions, the one I can answer is this: If we move will this thing follow us? Yes, this thing does follow. It followed them when they moved, and as a matter of fact, this thing did follow Smokey and his family on three occasions, in three different homes that were haunted. In the second apartment, Smokey said they used to hear furniture moving around at night. In the third home, the windows always flung wide open.
I was never exactly fond of our furry feline companions. Stupid, lazy, and boring were adjectives that came to mind. That is, until Weezur came along. So, to give you a proper snapshot of how I came to own and appreciate cats, and what Weezur was like, I’ll first explain the unlikely connection between comic books, the city where I’m from, and cats.

1. Comics

The three o’clock bell rang loud and clear, abruptly ending seventh period and the school day. Mr. Finley, our eighth grade English teacher stopped the discourse in mid-sentence.

“Othello and Desdemona be damned,” I said ruefully shaking my head. I snapped my text-book shut, tucked it into my grip, and was out the door. My name is Ben, and I met up with a couple of other geek friends, Jeff and Dave, in front of James Denman Jr. High School. From there, we raced two blocks up to the BART station. BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) in the year 1973 was the San Francisco Bay Area’s futuristic version of a subway. It zipped underground through SF proper, beneath the bay into Berkeley and beyond at 90 MPH—blue neon dotting the dark, sleek tunnels. San Francisco, where I’m mostly from, is sometimes referred to as “Baghdad by the Bay.” This is probably because it is fairly exotic, a sample of the world in 49 square miles. Not too big when you consider you could walk from the two furthest points in under three hours.

Anyway, my friends and I were headed to the SF Comic Book Co. down on 23rd Street in the Mission District to load up on the latest tales and editions of Marvel and D.C. Comics. We could have spent only a nickel a piece instead of the 35 cents to
get there, but then we would’ve had to endure 40 minutes on a crowded bus through city traffic with all the attendant starts and stops. With BART we would get there fast, in air-conditioned comfort in 1/10th the time—four minutes, give or take. Time, at the beginning of a given month, was critical.

That was when Gary, the comic shop proprietor, would get the bulk of his monthly shipments. Gary’d been known to sell out of certain key issues right way, and it was our objective to at least be there with the other after-school comic freaks were such a situation to occur.

We arrived at the 24th street and Mission street station, which was a cosmopolitan blend of humanity, accented heavily with Latin, Bohemian, and Hippie. Weaving through the crowd, we hurried the remaining one block down to 23rd St. and turned left.

The SF Comic Book Co, with its paint chipped and discolored to a mottled grey, looked like little more than a hole-in-the-wall. Coming in out of the sun, the place was dim—probably more to discourage in-house reading than to save on electricity. Once your eyes adjusted, however, it was about 1200 square feet, though extremely cramped. Adults, teenagers, and kids navigated between stacked boxes of comics and magazines in order to get to the various display cases and racks, which lined the walls.

The select rare and valuable books were pinned to the wall in their protective mylar encasings. They filled every available inch of upper wall space, creating a colorful cover motif.

As mentioned, Gary owned the place. He was a big hippie with a serious look. His right eyebrow seemed always cocked, an expression that said, “Just try stealing from me, if you
dare.” He and his tall, rangy assistant, Ito, kept vigil over the organized chaos.

Gary and Ito always seemed to be munching, or at least in the process of ordering munchables. Usually it was Super burritos. He would always order his without rice, but extra beans. In case you’re not familiar with this California staple: it’s a large, flour tortilla (minimum of 18” in diameter) filled with a mountain of food (i.e. seasoned rice, beans, choice of meat, cheese, sliced avocado, sour cream, and fresh salsa). The whole thing is deftly folded, rolled, and then wrapped in tinfoil. A proper one should weigh no less than two and a half pounds.

Anyway, I mention all the previous because it was part of my establishment as a comic book collector. And if comics hadn’t been part of my past, then I never would have encountered Weezur.

2. **Cats**

Cut to 1988: I hadn’t been collecting comics for well over a decade. My time was now centered around a firm in Silicon Valley, where I worked as a computer programmer. I didn’t like it, though, an I often call in sick, as I did on this one particular day. Even though I’d barely thought about comics in the previous twelve years, I still had much of my collection in protective mylar, thinking that one day they’d be worth a mint. I took the opportunity to shoot on over to the SF Comic Book Co. to pick up a copy of the Overstreet Price Guide. It assesses the value of pretty much every comic book in existence.

I found a parking space almost right in front. Gary was outside sitting on a couple of milk crates, and eating from a half-gallon of Dreyer’s Rocky Road.
“Ha! Same old Gary,” I laughed to myself. Well, not exactly the same. He looked much older, and bigger. Same long hair and serious look, though.

“Hello Gary. Remember me? I used to come here regularly, like 13 years ago. “ He didn’t remember, though. He had the excuse that he’d seen a million people come and go, which of course was true. After some chit-chat, where he was telling me how the industry really changed, I went inside to browse a bit and buy the price guide. When I came out, he was still sitting there eating his ice cream. Suddenly I remember a good friend of mine, Sarah, was still frantic about her cat that went missing a couple of weeks back. She lived a few blocks away, so I explained this to Gary and asked if he happened to see a stray orange Tabby without a collar. Sarah didn’t believe in collars because they could get caught on a fence and the cat could end up strangling itself.

“No, but I’ll tell you what,” Gary said. “I’ve got a kitten that needs a home. If you come back at 5 PM and give me a life home, I’ll give you one. I’m only about eight blocks from here.”

“Hmm. Not a bad idea,” I thought. I could surprise Sarah with a new kitten. “I’ll see you at 5,” I said. Just then another customer came out of the shop and stopped to look at Gary.

“You know you’re going to kill yourself eating that stuff like that,” the man exhorted.

“What a way to go,” said Gary, with his deadpan look, as he scooped another spoonful of half-melted Rocky Road.

At 5 PM, I picked up Gary and we headed to his place over on Army Street, now called Martin Luther King Jr. Way. Upon entering his abode—an Edwardian style typical of San Francisco housing—I was wholly unprepared for what came next. Boxes upon boxes of comics stacked nearly to the ceiling lined the left side of an ample stairway. But it was the smell that
really floored me. I smelled a million cats. Well, 105 according to him. Actually, 104, since one had died that morning.

When I got to the top of the stairs, I saw cats everywhere: cats of all sizes, meowing cats, sleeping cats, cats on the tops of tables, chairs, sofas, on the floor, in the living room, dining room, and the kitchen. There were dirty saucers, bowls of half-eaten food, milk, and water scattered everywhere, and litter boxes too. If his comic shop was organized chaos, his home was the same, only lacking the organized part.

“You want something to eat?” he asked, making a bee-line to the kitchen.

“Not hungry. Thanks anyway.”

“Go ahead and pick out anyone you want. Sure you can’t take more than one?”

“One is enough,” I called out. I walked around, looking and carefully stepping. My mouth was still slightly agape, wondering how anyone could live like this. The door leading to the backyard was wide open, presumably for those cats that chose to do their business outside.

After walking around some more, I noticed a lively kitten playing with the shoelace on an old tennis shoe. I picked him up to look him in the face.

“Meow,” he said. Hmm… cute.

“I think Sarah’s going to love you,” I said.

I brought him to the kitchen, again making my was carefully through the melee of cats. Gary was standing at the counter munching on Triscuits and what looked to be a chicken salad. He kept pushing this cat away who was trying to get to his food, but the cat just kept coming back.

“This is the one I want,” I announced, holding up the kitten.

“Can’t you take one more?” he said, through a mouthful.
“Afraid not, Gary, but thanks anyway.”
He turned suddenly, opening the freezer.
“Almost forgot I’ve got to bury this one before it gets dark.” Grasping a bushy tail that was frozen solid, he pulled out a two-and-a-half-foot-long cat and held it straight out. It reminded me of the cat that used to be pictured on Ever-Ready batteries. Even though I knew it was logical for Gary to put the dead cat in the freezer until he got home from work, I’d had enough.

“Uh, Gary. It was good seeing you again. Thanks a bunch for the kitten.”

Sarah of course loved the new kitten. She named it Weezur because he had a purr that sounded just a bit like he was wheezing. So, I must say I was surprised when I heard from her eight months later and she told me she’d moved out of her apartment, but left Weezur there. She said he’d gone crazy and literally started running around the walls. If I wanted him, I should come get him ASAP.

Since I felt a bit responsible for that cat, I decided right then that I was going to adopt him. Besides, I had to cut Weezur some slack. I should mention that Sarah held a weekly NSA meeting (that’s a particular sect of Buddhism) where 15 to 20 people came over and chanted loud and fast in unison, in a foreign tongue. The first time I walked in on a session I wondered if it was Devil worshipping—no disrespect intended of course. But that sort of thing could give anyone or anything the heebie-jeebies if you couldn’t process it.

And so I ended up with Weezur. He grew into an agile and powerful 18 pound cat—pretty large for a typical domestic. But then again, he wasn’t truly typical. A cross between a long-haired Persian or possibly Maine Coon with a sleeker Calico type, he was not only cool, but smart too.
Once I accidentally locked him in the house. Normally I leave the backyard door ajar so he could come and go as he pleased. I was gone the whole day and he obviously had to use the bathroom at some point. Most cats would have probably scratched up the living room rug trying to bury their business in a corner if there was no litter box. Not Weezur. He found his way into the bathtub. Smart—easy for me to clean.

Another time I found him playing with a mouse. Weezur would bat the mouse back and forth, then the mouse would play dead and he’d just watch it patiently. After a few seconds, the mouse would scramble up and Weezur again would bat it back and forth and the mouse would again play dead. This pattern repeated itself a few times. When he finally got bored, he brought the mouse over to a newspaper to eat it. Not a single drop of blood spilled, not even on the newspaper.

One time I took him with me to a girlfriend’s house because I knew I’d be gone for a few days. She lived half-way across the city, a good 3 or 4 miles. When it was time for me to return home, I could not find Weezur. I hadn’t seen him since the second day. Almost a week after I’d gotten home, who do I hear meowing at the back door? Yeah, Weezur. He looked extremely haggard and had lost nearly half his weight, but he was alive. Somehow he was able to follow his sense of smell home.

Alas, one day, after having him for a good five years, he never showed up again. Coincidentally, the lady opposite my backyard had moved out. Since I had followed Sarah’s advice about not putting collars on cats, the lady probably thought Weezur was a stray. Anyway, where-ever he ended up, I hope he lived a happy life.
ESTER—PERHAPS by Don N.

She sits and waits for her ride like she’s done every Sunday night for the past 10 years. Her name is Ester. Ester was born in 1880, the same year as her best friend, Bob. They grew up together—Elementary, Middle, and High School. They did everything together—school dances, birthday parties, sleepovers, camping. You name it, they did it.

It was only natural that Ester and Bob dated and eventually got married at 18. They had two boys, Robert II and John. John died of what is now known as infant death syndrome at five weeks old. Ester always blamed herself for not checking on John more often during the night. So, naturally, all of the love and attention was focused on Robert II.

Bob did well as an inventor and provider for his wife and son. During WWI, Bob invented a “Whatchamacallit” so that the timing of the bullets would pass through the propeller without hitting it. Bob made a lot of money, so when the Stockmarket crash of 1929 hit (beginning the great depression), Ester and Bob were unscathed. Bob received many government contracts and patented over 100 inventions.

In 1936, Bob invented a “Thingamabob” that enabled bombers to actually drop bombs on their targets during WWII. During the Korean War, Bob invented a “Doohickey” which made missile launches more accurate.

Bob was also a business owner and CEO of his own Gadget corporation named “Go Go Gadget.” Bob always told Ester, “My job is to provide and take care of you and Robert II. Your job is to raise Robert II with discipline, character, and dignity.

Then, ten years ago to the day, Bob dropped dead of a heart attack at work.
As Ester reflects on some of the hard times—WWI, the stock market crash, the depression, WWII, the Korean War—she remembers how lucky she was to be privileged, always dressing with class and style and dignity. Ester didn’t see herself as unsociable or uppity, but since Bob’s death she’d become reclusive. No more dinner parties or social events. She still misses John.

Ester always thought she had good taste. Her favorite colors are blue and gold, and she tastefully decorated her twelve-room mansion accordingly. Ester liked balance, for items to be symmetrical, the furniture centered, items squared off, nothing curvy.

This is Ester’s 520th consecutive Sunday dinner at her son and daughter-in-law’s house. When Bob died in 1953, on their 55th wedding anniversary, Robert II told his mom: “You’ll be having dinner with us on Sundays—give the cook and the maid the day off for crying out loud. You need to get out of that old house. You see, Robert II was also brought up privileged and a bit spoiled, so he didn’t look at his mother’s mansion as such… just another old house.

Robert II and his wife June have two children, Robert III (age 15) and John (age 13). They were 5 and 3 when their grandpa, Bob, died. Robert II now runs Go Go Gadget Inc, and although his father invented the “whatchamacallit”, the “thingamabob”, and the “doohickey” (which Robert II thought were silly names), Robert II did invent his one and only invention, which he called the “Hula Hoop”. Talk about a silly name.

Ester thinks that perhaps it’s time for a change. Her grandsons are now 13 and 15, and, she reflects, *I hardly know my*
Ester found it hard to get close to John because she felt that if anything happened to him, it would be her fault.

She thinks to herself: Tonight’s going to be different. What if I start the conversation and I show interest in my teenage grandsons, whom I love but haven’t told them in ten years. Yes! Yes. Tonight’s the night I will start to pass on my life experiences and provide them with knowledge and wisdom and not just money! Tonight’s the night I start living again and stop wallowing in my loss of my soul mate, lover, and best friend. Tonight’s the night!

Perhaps.
DEDICATED TO MY JOB by Louis Z.

My life is dedicated to my job. What would I do with it? I have been working since I was 13 years old and found that I truly loved my work.

I was always employed and kept advancing over time. All my jobs became more complex and serious, so I became more dedicated and wondered what would I do with out it?

The sad part is when my life changed and I went to jail and lost my job. What would I do? I became very sad and wondered where and how I would spend my time.

Over time I have since become more dedicated to various programs and I began to enjoy my time as a teacher. This was my main program, to help other inmates. The world is never the same when one is incarcerated, and the person must adjust to the new world he must live in.

I often wonder what I should do next. How do my programs help me to achieve release from jail?

Trying to stay in contact with everyone is difficult and the job helps me to concentrate on my world as it is. Is this a good thing? I often wonder what job I will get when I’m released.

I’ve come to the conclusions that life is filled with change and one must be ready to adjust or fail to be successful. I often wonder: What will I do?

I plan to move to another state. Will I be able to adjust and get a job?

Who knows what life will bring?
If it would be alright with the Creative Writing workshop coordinator [hold out hand] and with the approval of my fellow convicts [hold out hand]. I would like to sing a song I wrote [if no, sit down / if yes, “Thank you”]

It’s a short little ditty sung to that classic rock number from way, way back in the day, “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean” [clear throat].

My mind got lost in their deception
My mind don’t belong to me
My mind got lost in reception
That’s where DOCCS took it from me.

Bring back, bring back,
Oh bring back my mind to me, to me.
Bring back, bring back
Oh bring back my mind to me!

The warden gave me a warning
Because he didn’t like what he’d seen
The warden he gave me that warning, then had me put on Thorazine.

Bring back, bring back,
Oh bring back my mind to me, to me.
Bring back, bring back,
Oh bring back my mind to me!

The drug it was very effective
it took a good hold of me
The drug was so very effective,
I walked around smelling like pee.

Bring back, bring back,
Oh bring back my mind to me, to me.
Bring back, bring back,
Oh bring back my mind to me!

They got me off that medication,
my mind is right as you see.
They got me off that medication,
that’s why you are hearing me sing.

Bring back, bring back,
Oh bring back my mind to me, to me.
Bring back, bring back
[sing slowly] Oh bring back my mind to me!

Written and Produced by: John R and Bobby Books
Engineering by: Bobby books and The Volumes
Recorded at Books Studios London
I was standing on the corner of 3rd Ave and witnessed two cars having an accident at a traffic light on the crossroads of 3rd Ave and Miller Place. There was an Oldsmobile and a Chevy involved where the Chevy went through a red light and was hit by the oncoming Oldsmobile.

The cars suffered minor damage to the front end on the Chevy and the front left fender on the Oldsmobile.

The two cars stopped and the drivers got out and immediately started an argument, each saying the other driver ran the stop light. This argument kept getting louder and more threatening and led to the Chevy driver hitting the Oldsmobile driver and knocking him to the floor.

The police show up right after the Oldsmobile driver was down and the cop saw it, which gave him a reason to arrest the Chevy driver on assault charges.

It was later found that the Chevy driver didn’t have a license, causing him to be charged with numerous offenses and the Oldsmobile driver later sued the Chevy driver for physical damages and won $250,000.

This goes to show you that a bad temper always get you nothing but pain and trouble.

I found the scene to be something that was sad and not a way to act towards others.

The moral of the story is that when a person does not control his temper and does not think of the consequences in advance before acting on his emotions, it can lead to some serious problems.

The Chevy driver learned this the hard way and is now residing in prison, where he is unhappy and could have gone home if he had acted more in control and thought ahead.
MY BEST FRIEND by Maurice N.

We often speak of friendships and how they develop and grow over the years. But seldom do we speak of friendships that never fully develop and grow. The undeveloped or aborted friendships that do occur usually happen due to the actions or inaction of one of the parties concerned.

This is a story about a friendship severed due to circumstances beyond control and awareness of either party. This is about my Best Friend named Joseph.

Pay close attention because you may get lost, as did Joseph and I over 50 years ago.

Joseph and I were opposite in many of our ways. He was quiet, subdued. I was loud, outspoken. He was being raised by a single parent, his father. I was raised by my mother.

We met during the summer of 1967, during the Newark, NJ riots.

We didn’t truly understand much about the riots and in all honesty, we really didn’t care.

What we cared about was scavenging the neighborhood for bike parts and soda bottles to supplement an allowance we wished for but never received. But for two underprivileged youths, we were content.

In addition to our scavenging, we tried shining shoes. That venture didn’t pan out because we were too busy competing with each other on whose shoe-shine box was better.

We also had the pleasure of raiding the neighbor’s yards that were rife with various trees (apples, pears, peaches) and grape vineyards.
As the ’67 school year merged into ’68, we were exposed to an ugly side of our nation’s culture: the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. We were too young to understand the magnitude of this event. Neither could we appreciate the teacher’s attempts to give comfort to our delicate minds. She need not have. Because to us, Dr. King was a Doctor, and the hospital would save him.

After this event, Joseph would come by to pick me up for school. He would wait in the hallway of our second floor tenement.

One day my mother saw Joseph in the hallway waiting for me and told him to go inside and wait.

Over the proceeding school term, Joseph and I became increasingly close. that is, until the summer immediately after the school year. Midway through this summer, Joseph disappeared. Moved. No Goodbye or forwarding address. Just moved, relocated.

It took awhile to readjust to not having him around, and I missed the times we spent being carefree kids.

It hurt not knowing why he would leave without saying a word. For a time, I was angry.

When I finally figured out the reason for his unannounced departure, I could only smile, and wish him the best life possible.

For over fifty years I thought of him and will continue to do so.

I often wonder if he’s still alive. Did he get married? Have children? Finish school? After all, he was (is) my very Best Friend.

Oh, did I not mention it.
You should have reminded me.
Joseph is White!
In first grade, you poop your pants and cry.
   You’re stained.
You get caught smoking cigs in the bathroom in sixth grade.
   You’re stained.
The teacher smells liquor on your breath in home room.
   You’re stained.
Your friend’s mother finds weed in his pants pocket and says that
   it’s yours.
   You’re stained.
You get arrested for breaking and entering.
   You’re stained.
Cops pull you over and find drugs in your car.
   You’re stained.
You get caught cheating on your spouse.
   You’re stained.

At one time or another in our lives we’ve been stained. Some
stains come out fairly quickly—some take awhile but eventually
come out. Others fade with time but never truly leave. And then
there are stains that no matter what you do will never go away.
So, next time you happen to run into somebody who is stained,
you don’t have to be their stain remover. Just treat them how you
would want to be treated if you were stained.
We have reached the end of the class,
but I think we have just scratched the surface.
Below that surface are mysteries yet to unfold.
It will all be brighter than before.
I hope you’re right because I have things to say.
What adventures lie ahead?
What will the future hold for us?
Publishing contracts?
We have reached the end of the class.
We must leave today.
We can keep writing all night long.
Before the night is through, let’s all have coffee.
We have reached the end of the class
And we’re all a little older now
We have changed our world,
and shared our hearts.
Ten weeks into this, we finally showed each other our faces.
And boy what a sight!
We can all feel a sense of satisfaction.
We’re going to have a party in October!
Who’s bringing the beer?
We will be changing our world now, by bringing booze inside to share with the superintendent.
If we are barred from doing the above, we will not be reading our work—that’ll be our protest.
Or maybe not!
We learned each others names and reimagined our own.
Next we’re going to learn how to spell them.
We all appreciate each other’s sense of humor.
Collectively can we wonder if there is actually balm in Gilead?
We are all over the place as usual,
but it was fun all the same.
We should each stay in our own creative zone.
We have reached the end of the class,
so we’re going to have to start reading our stuff to Ms. O instead.
And she’ll quit her job after a month of it!
We are going to be bored.
No way, Jose. We’re going to listen to great music on Tuesdays
and keep writing from prompts.
And if we still grow bored, we’ll write about our boredom, and
we’ll make it interesting.
That way, the class never really ends.