

Scarlet Letters

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Scarlet Letters, a quarterly online journal for the Wellesley College Class of 1956, features our memoirs, poetry, prose, and reviews of the books of class members. *Scarlet Letters* aims to foster interaction among Fifty-Sixers and to encourage them to write. Class members are invited to submit short pieces in such categories as first memory, significant Wellesley experience, travel commentary, work experience, and humor. One ongoing effort will be the production of our own obituaries while we still have time to revise them!

Illustration created by Eunice Agar for our 55th Reunion Record Book.

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PINK LILIES

When we were eighteen
We sat on the edge of our beds
and talked all night:
How we loved this one or that one,
How they loved or didn't love us.

We were beautiful then
(Although we thought otherwise)
We were perfumed and smooth
With silky heads and strong, straight bodies.
We hummed and burned with the deep energy
in the hearts of flowers,
And we gave off their pure, indescribable scents.
We were tulips and roses;
We were camellias and pink lilies.

I couldn't say when that began to change
Or when we felt something
Heavier and more tangled within us
More like the intricate patches of the forest floor
Where roots and leaves are matted down and many
are broken,
Where there are dark scents and shadowy places.

When the news came,
The voice on the phone was your daughter's.
She was as old as our mothers had been then.
At first I thought, not yet!
But then I remembered: of course, my darling,
It's right after all.
Now you are tulips and roses;
Once again you are camellias and
Pink lilies.

Sheila Owen Monks
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*Sheila read this beautiful poem at the memorial
meeting during our recent college reunion.*

Riches to Rags to Riches by Marlene Zahnke Hoerle
(including Michelle Toomey, "Crisis of Faith: Is the
Power of Psychological Integrity Real?"), available
from Amazon, \$10.

The journeys depicted in this book are the life stories of two amazing people. Dr. Toomey writes of an inner journey from a sheltered religious girlhood to a fully integrated spiritual and psychological life in the world. Marlene Hoerle tells of a journey from what was the expected path of a 1950s educated upper-middle-class girl to a well-realized and psychologically whole woman.

This is an inspiring story of the power of true friendship and love. Marlene was leading an active, full life when she was struck by viral encephalitis, which affected her brain and left her in a coma for seven weeks. Her difficult recovery and ongoing struggle to continue to live her life as fully as possible is movingly rendered. Her continued existence and ability to function, her path to a different kind of "riches" would not have been possible without the truly amazing and loving support she received from her one-time teacher, therapist, and friend, Dr. Michelle Toomey.

Their stories are told alternately: Dr. Toomey's in the form of essays and musings, Marlene's as reflections on her life experiences. After a time spent with these two remarkable women, we readers are left with a deep and profound sense of the power of the human spirit and our ability to grow and love.

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This Is No Bull

Mid-July 1974

We, the entire Oleson family, were returning home to a suburb¹ of La Paz, Bolivia, after a memorable trip to the Machu Picchu area of Peru with friends from Bowie, Maryland. We had parted from those friends in Cusco very early that morning. They took a flight to Lima for a few days at sea level. We took the only train from Cusco to Puno, Peru, where we would be picked up by our Bolivian driver.

The ten-hour train ride took us through amazing *altiplano*² scenery and one of the highest passes³ in Peru. I do not recall that the train stopped at any stations, but, a couple of hours beyond the pass, on a hill above the town of Pucará, it suddenly halted. John was reading, as usual. I was looking out the window, wondering why the train would stop dead on the tracks like that, when I noticed a market in progress a bit down the hill. I asked the conductor if I had time to get off the train and look around the market. He indicated that I would have plenty of time.

As I climbed down the hill, I recalled having seen the famous ceramic *toritos*⁴ from Pucará for sale in certain La Paz markets and decided to look for such a souvenir of Peru in the one I was fast approaching. At one table I spied the largest painted and partly-glazed clay bull I had ever seen and began bargaining for him. Haggling over price was considered a required activity in the folk markets in Latin America. I had long since mastered the system. When I had nearly completed the bargain, I looked up toward the train. To my horror, at that moment the train began chugging away very slowly. I stopped worrying about getting the best price, threw the money at the salesperson, grabbed my treasure, and raced up the hill.

To this day I do not know how I made it onto the moving train, panting up the stairs, reaching out with one outstretched arm to some anonymous helping hand, while clutching the bull to my breast with the



other arm. When I got back to the seats where John and our three children were still engrossed in their previous activities, I was appalled that no one even looked up, as if I had just returned from a bathroom break. In fact, no one had noticed my absence. Only the new purchase proved the story of my adventure.

October 12, 2010

Now living in Baltimore, I wake up every day to the sight of my piece of beautiful Peruvian craftsmanship, still without a single chip. I wonder again how I, all alone on the *altiplano*, would have found my way back to La Paz and when that day John would have thought to ask about my whereabouts, had I not leapt, Indiana-Jones-style, onto the train. My heart pounds again in remembrance.

Mary Russell Oleson

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1. at 11,000 feet

2. Spanish for “high plateau”

3. La Raya Pass, elevation 14,172 feet

4. Spanish for “little bulls”

Obituaries

Joan Ward Lasley began doing class obituary memorials for our 50th reunion book in 2005 and has continued ever since. She is uniquely situated to give suggestions about writing these important documents and we thank her for sharing her own.

How to Write Your Obituary

Start out with the usual 4 Ws: who, what, where, when

Give the historical data: parents, education, work experience, marriage, volunteer experience.

After that is completed you can add whatever you want to let the readers know more about you and what you enjoyed doing. Any travel experiences, hobbies, stuff like that.

At the end of the obit you should list survivors, followed by arrangements & directions for where memorials should be sent.

Lastly, someone should make sure the obit is sent to Wellesley and any newspapers you want notified for publication.

I suggest that you review this every year (I do mine on or near my birthday). The historical data will not change but your current interests, activities, residence, survivors, etc. may have changed during the year. You also may have changed or added to where you would like memorial gifts to be made.

It really isn't ghoulish, it's practical! Your survivors will have enough to do! They also may not know everything that is important to you and for what you want to be remembered.

My Obituary

Joan Ward Lasley, (age) of (residence), formerly of Milford, Westport, & Norwalk, CT, died on (date). She was born December 5, 1934 in New Rochelle, NY the daughter of the late Howard B. Ward, Jr. and the late Emily (Goodenough) Ward. She was raised in Darien, CT and graduated from Darien High School in 1952. She received her BA degree from Wellesley College in 1956.

She was the widow of the late Jerry K. Lasley, who she met when she was sixteen and to whom she was married on June 16, 1956 in Darien.

While raising their children, she worked part-

time as a bookkeeper and a medical claims examiner. She later joined her husband as office manager, bookkeeper & tax preparer in their business consulting firm, Business & Tax Services of Norwalk. They retired in December 1995. She returned to work in 2005, after the death of her husband, as a seasonal tax preparer for H & R Block in Punta Gorda, FL. She retired in 2011.

She was a hospital volunteer in Milford, CT and for over (# years- started in 1997) at Charlotte Regional Medical Center (now Bayfront Health Punta Gorda) and served as the Treasurer of the Volunteers from 2007–2014. In CT she served as President of the Southern CT Wellesley Club, Treasurer of the Saugatuck Congregational Church in Westport, and Trustee of the Norwalk Seaport Association. She was a past member of the Milford (CT) Yacht Club and the Shore & Country Club in Norwalk, CT. In FL she was a past member of the Charlotte Harbor Yacht Club, serving as Fleet Captain, Director, and Treasurer at different times during her membership. She was elected in 2011 as Treasurer of the Wellesley College Class of 1956 and served until 2016. She was a member of the Board of Directors of the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra in Punta Gorda from 2004-2014. She served as Secretary and twice as President during her tenure.

She was an avid boater having learned to sail as a teenager on Five Mile River, Darien and Long Island Sound. She switched to power boating after her marriage, piloting various size boats from a 25-foot houseboat "Blue Bug" in the '60s to their retirement motoryacht, the 53-foot "Lady Blue." For 8 years after retiring from business, she and her husband cruised more than 26,000 miles on "Lady Blue" fulfilling their dream of seeing as much as possible of the United States by water including trips into Canada and the Bahamas.

She loved needlework of all kinds. She played recreational bridge which she learned (as did many others) while at Wellesley. She played with various groups during her life, always enjoying the conversation and friendships she made as well as the challenge of the game.

She was preceded in death by her parents, her husband, and an infant daughter, Blythe.

She is survived by her son Daniel G. Lasley (Laura) of West Chester, PA; her daughter Barbara L. Reid (John “Skip”) of Lynnfield, MA, her brother, Arthur B. “Jerry” Ward (Patricia) of Santa Barbara, CA; four grandchildren, Benjamin (Yanessa) & Jacqueline Lasley and Jerry (Casondra) & Brian Reid and numerous nieces & nephews.

There will be a celebration of her life
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In lieu of flowers, please send memorials to the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, Punta Gorda, FL; Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA; or a charity of your choice.

Submit to:

The *Charlotte Sun-Herald* – Punta Gorda

(get picture from Charlotte Symphony)

The Norwalk Hour

The Darien Review

The Westport News

Joan Ward Lasley

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What is the first thing you remember? Write it down with as many specific details as you can. Try to think why this is something you remember. You will have begun your autobiography.

My First Memory

My husband, Richard, says that he remembers walking for the first time. He remembers because the family was so overjoyed.

I don’t remember anything that early. My first vivid memory is of standing on the landing of the wide wooden stairway in the large house in Piedmont, California, where my father’s mother, Emma Wissing Lauper, and her five unmarried children lived. I was three years old. There was a heavy carved newel post with indentations that I could fit my cheek and fingers into. I stood there, fitting myself into the carvings, feeling some comfort.

This was generally a happy place to be. On this big landing there was a window that looked out at a tree where nesting robins raised their little chicks. My older sister, Georgia, and I liked to come and visit at that house. We played with the big tortoise that lived under the stove. We liked our aunts’ sewing box. We could spill out all the pins and then pick them up with a big magnet. We sorted out the buttons in the button jar. Our merry uncles and aunts teased and played with us on our frequent visits.

But this day was different. I was alone, sad, forlorn, standing on the landing, fitting my cheek and fingers into my little places. What had happened? Something so primal and threatening, something so life changing, something that so disrupted the pleasant world I lived in, that I remembered this moment above all others, registering it in my mind for the future. My little sister had been born.

All that large household was too busy to pay any attention to me. They were at the hospital or making some kind of arrangements, and I was abandoned.

Of course on one hand I was happy to have another sister. But on the other hand, I understood even then that life as I knew it would never return. I was displaced, supplanted. I had lost my position as the pampered baby. Little blond Dixie Pauline with her sassy ways became the “sunshine” of our family. They even called her Sunshine. My privileged days would be over, and so they were.

Claudia Lauper Bushman

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Morning Ablutions

In the night when you were young came the questions. In the night when you are old come the questioners.

“Do you understand?”

I understand nothing. But these words he does not utter, he only thinks them—his head sunk down on his chest—staring at the floor.

“I repeat, do you understand?”

I understand the wicked flee . . . when no man pursueth. He smiles, but still he is mute. He is an old man, and this, a familiar dream.

“You do not answer my questions.”

And you shall not question my answers. This response pleases him, both in its formulation and the fact that it too is stillborn.

“You will be left now to consider. We will be back.”

I was only a child! What do you want from me? But his silent shout is muffled.

And then the light goes out. The interrogations take place only at night, in the middle of the night when—bedclothes warm, his limbs heavy and prickling with sleep—he opens his eyes and sees that he is being observed.

For long minutes nothing is said. He sits up, swings his legs over the side of the bed. He stares at the floor, at the boots of the men who sit opposite. They sit very erect. The man who never speaks sits in the chair by the table. The other sits on the table and swings his leg back and forth, a slow pendulum of movement. The tip of the boot mirrors the light, a gleam of polished black leather.

He does not let himself look up at their faces. Enough to hear the voice with its clipped consonants. He does not want to see the eyes, he does not want this voice to be humanized. No smiles, no frowns—only the familiar cadences, the timbre, the phrasing.

“We are not speaking of betrayal. We are speaking only of details here, precise details. Who forged your identity card? How was this done, please?”

The room is so quiet that he can almost believe he hears the nervous ticking of the interrogator’s watch. But this of course is impossible. It is his own pulse he hears, the thrumming tick-tick-tick so loud in his eardrums it blots out the questions he knows by heart.

“Who bribed the conductor?”

“Was it the peasant woman—your mother’s neighbor—who found the safe-house in Bretagne?”

“At the station, what did she say to you, *votre mere*? Did she say goodbye?”

“What did you reply? Do not make me go? Come with me, Maman?”

The boot stops its swinging movement. There is complete stillness in the room. He waits for the next sentence. It is always the same. It is not a question, it is a simple statement of fact. The voice has gone flat, the flat drone of the interrogator, sure of his evidence now, reciting the established charges, covering the known ground, the pocked moonscape of common knowledge, disputed by neither of them.

“You got on the train. You left them behind, skulking away in the dark, the night scavenger, saving his own skin. Do you understand?”

He understands only one thing. He understands that he is guilty but that this is not an admission he will ever make aloud, no matter how many nights the interrogator may address him, black boot swinging beside the silent figure who says nothing, who holds a spiral notebook and sits there, pencil poised, forever waiting for the confession that will not come—the atonement that is not permitted.

*

Each morning he looks in the mirror. Each morning he lathers gaunt cheeks with magic foam that transforms the harsh oblong of the jaw into the avuncular curves of a white-bearded patriarch whose staring eyes he is careful not to meet. A patriarch of almost sixty years cannot be responsible for the silent panic of his youth. In the gray-vaulted dimness of the Gare

du Nord, his mother had pressed the ticket into his hand. Trembling, he had taken it—what other choice was there? “Your Breton cousins,” she murmured. “They are your cousins, if anyone asks. You will be working for your Tante Elise at the factory—cutting patterns, tu comprends?” And he had nodded yes, smiled at the conductor, climbed aboard the train—afraid to wave, afraid to speak.

She had drilled and drilled him in the accent, the Breton accent of those strangers who would shelter him. Each night after his sisters had fallen asleep, he sat up with her while she coached him in pronunciation, in the vernacular expressions he must use as automatically as the Parisian street argot which she hated to catch him teaching Felicité and Marie Yvonne. Eyes blazing, she would snap, “If your Papa could hear such gutter talk!”

And ashamed, he fell silent, sick in his gut at the corruption of the streets which infected him, and in turn, his family. He felt rancid each time he returned to the apartment, more rancid than the packets of black-market butter he smuggled past the concierge whose bead-black eyes followed him up the stairs just as they had watched the day his father was taken down those same steps—head bowed—then turning for one quick glance up the stairwell at the family grouped beside the banister, at his son straining to follow while Maman grabbed at his sleeve and hissed, “*Tais-tois, mon fils,*” and then more gently, “You must be the man now, he depends on you.” And the sleeve had torn, but by then the shadowy face below was gone, the front door slammed, and the concierge stood where his father had stood, peering up at them, her eyes the same bottle-black color as those polished leather boots thumping down the staircase while outside klaxons wailed their obscene farewells.

He shaves very carefully, watching islands of skin surfacing through the lather with each stroke of the razor which he shakes into the sink jerking his wrist the way you might shrug off a fly—except this foam is flecked with tiny dots much smaller than a fly—tiny specks of human hair peppering the whiteness exactly as soot will speckle city snow, so that in the end, what was once a pure and fluffy white has become a dirty gray, “All cats are gray in the dark,

n’est-ce pas, mon petit?” the concierge whispered when she caught him one night tiptoeing past her door, holding out in front of him his normally flat book satchel that bulged with tins of powdered eggs and a precious sack of white flour, bartered booty in exchange for Papa’s imported cigars, the last box empty now, but Maman hugged him before he left the house, “We shall manage, *mon cher*, I have a plan, *dépêche-toi,*” she whispered and ruffled his hair, oily from too many weeks without soap. Oddly enough, that was the worst, the film of dirt that grew like gray scabs over the apartment, the tabletops, the sink, even the dishes, all the things his mother used to scrub, and shine; and now all her days were spent in whispered consultation with the peasant woman from Saint Brieuc who lived next door with her idiot son, in endless conversations on the phone with someone named Elise—his mother’s hand shielding the mouthpiece as if the very wires themselves might eavesdrop, gesturing with her free hand “Study! Study!!” when he looked up from his books to watch the way her mouth formed words that seemed sour to the lips and those hollow triangles beneath the cheekbones where once his father pinched rosy flesh, “Plump as apples,” he would laugh, “and just as tart,” and she would pretend to cuff him away but smile as she made the gesture, that radiant smile that had gone down the dim staircase with Papa, never to return again. The smile since then was a stretching of lips across teeth too big for the mouth which he had never really noticed before, and made him think of a dog he’d seen once at his grandparents’, baring sharp yellow fangs when Marie Yvonne tried to lift up the new puppy whose eyes were still sealed shut in that first most dreamless sleep of all.

He turns on the tap. He watches the water swirl away with the foam, then rubs his palm across his chin, his cheeks, smooth again, and he splashes after-shave lotion across his face. It stings in a pleasurable way. It even manages to bring a faint tinge of color to sallow skin, to pores all tightly closed. Yet even now—as his fingertips caress the smoothness—begins the slow progression of hair follicles pushing up . . . and up . . . to emerge as the prickly shoots of late afternoon, the midnight ripening into coarse stubble, and then the morning harvest as dawn

breaks and he reaches for his razor once more. Why not grow a full beard? he wonders silently, but the answer is always the same. It would be his father's face he must watch in this mirror, even though his own beard would be streaked now with gray while Papa's was a lustrous black. But the high-bridged nose is the same, the disdainful nostrils and the eyes he cannot face are Papa's eyes, the mouth is Papa's mouth, and now he wants to leave, it is time, it is late. He wipes the razor. He puts it away on the shelf, and the brush and the shaving cup, and he wipes his hands on the towel and turns to go, but the eyes command him to look into the mirror, so he stares first at the shiny chrome of the faucet, then slowly up the yellow tiles of the wall to the metal rim that brackets the glass.

And now the eyes are gazing at him. But they are kindly. They are not angry at all or the least bit sad, no—they smile back at him with that familiar wink that meant they shared a secret—this father, this son—they are the night hunters who must each evening go out and forage for the maman and the cubs back in the cave, and they must catch the young gazelle by her beautiful fawn-colored throat of such exquisite suppleness and sweetness, then drag her back to the lair all glistening with blood and tenderly drop the body, “*Bien sûr*, you must be the man now, my son, you must be their protector,” the smiling eyes are reminding him as they do each morning of his life.

Yes, each morning: the sink, the mirror, the eyes, and now the time has come to address the mirror in the sharp clipped consonants of the interrogating officer whose midnight voice he knows so well. But the words are not his. The words are the ones his mother spoke when they passed the closed green door of the concierge, and he can still see his mother avert her face as if they are passing a public urinal, sniff sharply, then mutter under her breath but he can read her lips, “*Putain, sale boche!*” and hurry them out to the vestibule .

But what he repeats each morning are not these exclamations but rather the very last thing she said as they walked slowly down the stone steps of the apartment building, and the shock of seeing Maman spit at their concierge cowering below them at the

coal-cellar door is still as fresh as the first morning she did it, spit precisely like a man, right over the iron balustrade, and then she spoke as he speaks now in his cold interrogator-voice—not hers, no—but the scorn is the same, and beyond that note of scorn, his own unique contribution—his alone—that special loathing of the self-accused:

“Jackal,” he says. “Do you understand?”

I understand nothing.

Barbara (Bee) Roberts Leith

from her book *Housebroken*

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Contributions and Inquiries Invited!

Send us two or three paragraphs describing the best present you ever got or recommending your favorite book. We'll keep a master list.

Do you have a favorite December tradition to celebrate Winter Solstice, the New Year, Hanukkah, Christmas, or Kwanza? Share it for the next issue.

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