

A Gift for You
from the Authors of Vanilla Heart Publishing
Celebrating Earth Day 2011



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I Swear That Raccoon Just Knocked On The Door **by Chelle Cordero**

Life in New York's lower Hudson Valley provided a few minor challenges for this former Bronx kid. The jungle of the city and wild forays on the subway was replaced with furry things and overnights in tents. This is the story of how I learned the true meaning of wild life.

As a kid, camping for me consisted of a sleepover under a card table covered with a bed sheet to make a tent in the middle of a friend's living room—and to make it extra challenging, we relied on flashlights and didn't turn on the overhead lights. My wild outdoors consisted of the park across the street where I grew up, the occasional dog (most times on a leash), and the red pinpoint eyes of rats staring from the sewer. We had pigeons, too.

When Mark and I married, we made the move to Rockland County and suburbia. Our first apartment overlooked a lake. Duck calls woke us each morning. We acclimated quickly and enjoyed the more relaxed pace. A few more moves found us raising our family in a home nearly bordering the great Harriman parkland. Our children grew up seeing deer in the backyard, avoiding random snakes here and there (most non-poisonous), and inviting friends to see the bear tracks through our back yard one summer. As they grew, they got involved in things like the scouts.

When my daughter Jenni was old enough to go into the Brownies, the troop leader, my soon-to-become best friend Cheryl, needed an assistant; I volunteered. When the girls were old enough to go camping, the Girls Scouts required they be accompanied by an outdoors certified troop leader. Cheryl had grown up in the area and had herself been a Girl Scout, so she would have been a natural to attend the mandatory training session, but the weekend it was scheduled she was committed to a school project for her teaching job. I went.

I was in a wooded boot camp hell! My hiking boots were too new, my sleeping bag was huge and heavy, and my backpack wasn't made for carrying gear across a rocky trail. (Camping backpacks are made with supports and extra belts.) Knowing absolutely zilch about real camping, I followed the shopping list and bought everything wrong. The instructor used the camp name "Chipmunk." Dispel the myth that chipmunks are cute, adorable critters! This Chipmunk was a reincarnated drill sergeant.

We did have a cabin to stow our gear in and learn about fireplace cooking. The very rainy and cold evening we all thought we'd be cooking and eating inside, Chipmunk turned to us and said, "Well, since it's raining out we are changing our schedule a bit. Go outside, make a fire, and cook your dinner." That weekend I learned to cook indoors or outdoors under all weather conditions and even make a portable stove from a coffee can. I also learned that wet rocks across a stream are darned slippery, when you are hungry enough you can pretend the dishes are clean even though you washed them in a dunk bag in cold water, and latrines are doable when the only other option is squatting over a hole in the woods. Somehow I received the certification, and we were able to take our troop camping.

We had a really fun day, and because the girls were so young we had a cabin for eating and sleeping. That night after we had cleaned up from a half-cooked dinner and the girls were laying their sleeping bags out on the floor, there was a distinct *rat-a-tat-tat* at the door. I opened the door expecting to see another troop leader from down the road. Instead I stared downward face-to-face at a raccoon standing on its hind legs and grinning at me! I shrieked and slammed the door. Cheryl thought it was funny, and to this day still teases me.

By that point I was hooked on both the Girl Scouts and camping. In later years I went camping several times, eventually using tents. I even became the Girl Scout summer camp health supervisor. It was a lot of years of fun and memorable experiences. There was the night my daughter and a buddy headed to the latrine and came across a bear foraging for food. Jenni knew not to run; her friend didn't. When the bear loped down the hill after them, they ran into the nearest cabin and slammed the door. And there was the day a group of campers were headed to the buses and were stopped by "something strange" on the path. A counselor came into my office to ask my advice. I went to the road to find a huge rattlesnake stretched completely across the path.

The Girl Scout camp is only a mile or so from my home in Harriman Park, near a section of the Appalachian Trail. This kid from the Bronx actually became quite comfortable with a different kind of wildlife than New York City had to offer. We still have deer in the backyard and bear sightings in the neighborhood. The raccoons often greet us in the driveway as they pry open garbage cans. Both Jenni and Marc became proficient campers and have guided other youth through camping adventures.

Although I no longer work summers at the Girl Scout camp, I have been back to camp now and then. The last time, I got smacked in the face by a black rat snake I stumbled into in the dark.

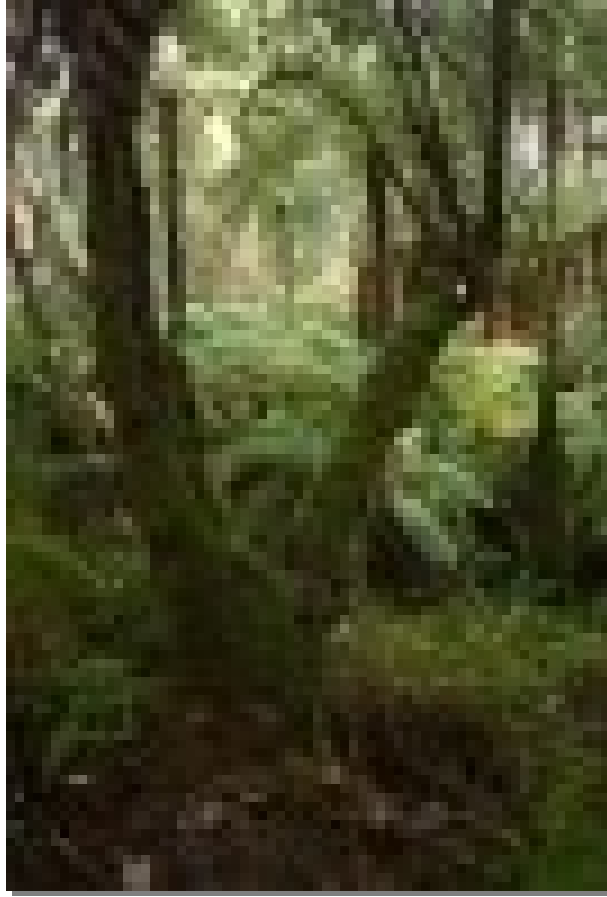
I visited the camp one night during a sleepover. There was a lot of talk about the bear tracks just up the hill. One of the camp counselors and I got into a heated debate about the location, so we took our flashlights and hiked into the woods. This counselor, Marti, came from the Midwest and was the camp's outdoors specialist. Shortly after we found the bear tracks—right where I said they were—we came across several pairs of glowing red eyes.

We both stopped, staying very still. I whispered to Marti, "What are those?"

She replied, "Coyotes. Don't worry, they are more scared of the human scent than we are of them."

Still frozen in place, I said, "So they're harmless?"

"Yeah." Marti dropped her light and moved off into the darkness, leaving me several feet behind. "Unless they're hungry."



This Place Has Many Names **by Anne K. Albert**

This place has many names. Forest. Wood. Thicket. Grove. It is an enchanted place, forever on my mind. Forever in my heart.

I first came upon it as a young girl. Barely six, I wandered in alone. It was as if I was drawn deeper and deeper into the trees by some ethereal being, beckoning me to enter her magical world.

Decades have passed since I was last there.

Yet, when I close my eyes I can still smell the pungent aroma of dry earth, decaying leaves, green shrubs and sweet blossoms. I can hear the soft snap of twigs as squirrels and chipmunks scurry by, their territorial chirps in perfect harmony with the cacophony of songs sung by robins, chickadees and jays. I gaze upward as gentle breezes sway treetop boughs of maple, oak and pine.

In springtime I twirl and hop and dance like one possessed at the first joyous splash of color and blooms. Trilliums. Jack-in-the-pulpit. White baneberry. Dogwood. Lilac. Plantain. They amaze.

Mesmerize. Transfix my very soul.

Spring turns into summer with long, lazy days blessed by pleasant rains. Every living thing within this woodland grows, matures and stretches skyward to touch the seductive yellow sun.

Then fall creeps upon the forest floor, bringing with it a robust bite to the soil and air. Maple trees dress in vibrant coats of red, yellow and orange. Plants once lush and green turn brown and huddle close as the earth and heavens cool.

A hushed calm sets in as crystal flakes descend. Then, winter's blanket--light, white and fluffy--covers mother earth, a reminder to all it is time to sleep.

Months pass, then the circle of life begins again. With the first glorious burst of April's warmth, the snowy coverlet begins to melt. Plants push, sprout, and bud. Creatures scamper, climb and dig. The forest beckons me once more.

This place has many names. Woodland. Thicket. Grove. It is an enchanted place, forever on my mind. Forever in my heart.

Earth Day Double Puzzle by S.R. Claridge

TARNOOD					○		
HERCAINUR	○	○					○
LESTE	○				○		
NOSW							
CIE			○				
NIRA		○					
WIDN							
LBGOLA			○				
MAIRNGW			○				
GORF		○					

V

Unscramble each of the clue words.

Take the letters that appear in ○ boxes and unscramble them for the final message.



Mushrooming **by Vila SpiderHawk**

“Any plans for the weekend?” Glenna Pfenning glanced up from her papers in the lounge yesterday. She’s the substitute taking Laura Henderson’s place, since Laura’s on maternity leave. From what I gather, Glenna holds her own quite well with Laura’s students, even the fifth period ones. That’s the football player class. They’re all built like factories, and she’s so small. I thought they’d give her a hard time. But she has an air about her that inspires respect. I like that. She’d make a good full-time teacher.

Normally I’d give her undivided attention, but I didn’t look up from my work. “No, not really. Just a ton of term papers to grade.”

“Well, tomorrow’s May first, and LONAL’s going mushrooming. Down by Meddingers’ old farm. You want to come? We always did that as kids—go mushrooming on May first.” She stuck her pencil in her auburn ponytail. Removing her glasses, she folded them up and laid them on top of the tests. I have never understood why people take their glasses off when they’re involved in a one-on-one

talk. I much prefer to keep mine on so I can see the person clearly. But, of course, that's just a personal choice.

"What's LONAL?" I nudged the seniors' essays aside.

"Lovers of Nature and Life." Her shrug was sheepish. "It's a great group with a really stupid name. Anyway, you want to come? We'll meet at ten at the farm."

I glanced down at the pile I still had to get through. "I don't know. I have to grade these by Monday."

"Okay. Well, give it some thought. You know the place and the time." The buzzer sounded, and we both had to scurry. "Ten AM. By their old store. There's parking at the gravel lot. You'll see the cars." She scooped her tests up and ran. I shoved my work into my briefcase and allowed the crush of students to carry me along to the next class.

I debated with myself for the rest of the day about the wisdom of taking the time off. "Oh you should go," my mom encouraged from her wheelchair at the home where I visited each day after school. "You never take the time for fun. It would be good to meet new people. Where's your sense of adventure?" she winked. "I'll go too." Mischief sparkled in her violet eyes. "Oops, I forgot." She touched the wheel. "I guess I've buckled my last swash." Earnestness engulfed the naughty glimmer in her eyes.

"Don't *you* forget, Pamela," she took my hand in both of hers, "that life is short." She squeezed my hand to make her point. "You'll be old soon, and you'll wish you'd made some time for things like this." Letting go, she chafed her palms and scrunched her shoulders. "Besides, I love the idea of your traipsing through the woods! Oh that's too rich." Her laugh was like an Irish ditty. "Yeah I dare you to go! Five dollars says that you're too chicken."

As a child of the city, I had always had a horror of plants that grew taller than my socks. I couldn't tolerate the itch or the thought that biting bugs would skitter up my dress to feast on me. Throughout those years, when my parents drove me to the Johnson farm to pick fresh corn, I'd beg to stay in the car. Sometimes Aunt Lillian and Kenny would tag along too, and we'd play poker while my parents roamed the field.

"I'll see your five and raise you one."

Her brow shot up. "Wow, a whole buck?"

"Hey, I'm a teacher. I'm not rolling in cash." I kissed her cheek. "I have to scoot. I'll let you know how it goes."

She kissed my hand then let it go. "Be sure you do. I'll be right here."

At the corridor's exit, I turned to blow a kiss. She blew one back, still grinning like a leprechaun

I microwaved a frozen dinner, the first one my hand laid on, and gulped it down over a stack of senior papers, circling faulty grammar and noting proper structures in the margins, giving scores for style and content. When I'd graded the last paper, I glanced up at the clock. It was midnight. I poured a glass of wine. "One class down. Four to go. A good night's work. I'll go tomorrow. I deserve to have a morning for myself." Having settled the issue, I toddled off to bed, leaving knife and fork and wine glass in the sink.

Nightmares punctured my sleep—dreams of woman-eating vines twirling up around my legs so that I could not escape from purple bugs the size of trucks chomping bloodless chunks from me. After each of the dreams I woke up in a cold sweat, determined to stay home in the morning. But when daybreak woke me up well before the alarm, I tried to picture myself counting six crisp one-dollar bills into my mother's waiting palm. "You get so smug when you're right," I stamped my foot at her snide smile glowing from the mirror on my bureau. "Well, you're wrong. I'm on my way. Oh yeah, I'm going to take a shower. You'll see! I'll go today. And I'll enjoy it!" I turned away. "Well, maybe not. But, by the power of Donald Trump, I'm going to do this!" Resolved, I stomped into the bathroom.

"It'll be fun," I told myself, stripping off my tee and panties. "It *will* be fun." I turned the water on to heat. "It'll be fun." I repeated standing under the flow, lathering and rinsing my hair. Creating a mantra of the simple three-word phrase, I washed and rinsed, chafed myself dry, and moisturized. And when my toothbrush filled my mouth so that I could not speak the words, I grunted the wish then spat and gargled.

"It'll be fun," I told the mirror, getting into bra and panties and yanking a yellow long-sleeved tee over my head. I wriggled into my jeans and tucked the tee shirt into them and then repeated the command in an irritated voice because I had forgotten about socks. I pulled them on and stuffed them up beneath the hem of the pants. "It'll be fun. But I'll wear boots, just in case."

Ramming my feet into the flat-heeled leather boots, I tied the laces tightly over the legs of my jeans. I raked my hair with my comb, at first letting it hang free but, reassessing that idea, braiding it. I pinned the braids up like a crown and pulled a baseball cap on, its bill reversed so it protected my neck.

Suddenly as giddy as a child skipping school, I checked my watch. I had an hour and a half. Allowing traveling time, I could still stop for morning coffee and a bagel, possibly a jelly donut. "I'll get to you," I told the papers as I grabbed my shoulder bag, raced out the door, and checked to make sure I had locked it.

"It'll be fun!" I really meant it as I drove to Village Square and parked my Honda at the front door of the diner. "I'm going to have a good time," I realized, sitting at the counter and deciding on a piece of apple pie. "When did I come to that conclusion?" I thought I'd mutely asked.

“I’m sorry, what?” A puzzled waitress stood between the sweets displays. She was chubby and pretty, round face crinkled in a smile, head tilted, brown braid slung across her shoulder. She looked about seventeen, about the age of my students. I imagined her conjugating verbs.

“Oh nothing,” I dismissed. “I’d like a piece of apple pie and black coffee. And a coffee to go.”

“You got it.” She nodded, pouring from a fresh pot and sliding a pie wedge to a plate. “You want some whipped cream on that?”

I shook my head and sipped my brew. It was good—nutty rich with a slight bitter aftertaste. But I regretted getting pie. It looked stamped out of a mold. I forked the top crust away. The fruit was influenza pale, its pieces Styrofoam peanut uniform. I took a tentative bite and found no hint of cinnamon, no touch of nutmeg or of clove or even lemon. Homogeneously sweet, no apple tartness interfered with the gelatinous corn syrup of the thing.

“Is something wrong with the pie?” As if she’d made the dreadful thing, a pall of hurt suppressed her eager cheeriness. I ate the pie out of pity, alternating cloying forkfuls with sips of coffee to help moderate the taste. I paid the bill and left a tip, my stomach outraged with me about the insult of the sugar I’d consumed.

“It’s okay,” I patted it as I slipped behind the wheel. “It will be fun, regardless of my menu choices. But I really am sorry that I didn’t get the bagel. That was bad. Seriously bad. I’ll never get their pie again.” I plunked my go-cup to its holder and drove off to the old farm. I hadn’t been there since Jack Meddinger had died.

The place was lonely and sad; the old store falling apart; its placard faded, chipped, and cracked; its siding broken. The roof was bowed as if the sky were much too heavy a burden to carry with the family all gone. Some of the window panes were broken. They were smudged with years of dirt and with the weather’s useless zeal to scrub them down.

“This will be fun,” I reminded, parking next to a blue Prius and indulging in a final swig of coffee. A clutch of women was chatting near a little yellow Kia, but I didn’t see Glenna. My heart tumbled. “It’ll be fun,” I insisted, crunching to the seven strangers just as Glenna pulled up in her dark green Nissan.

“Oh good! You made it!” she declared, stretching out her hands to me. She introduced me to the others as her colleague. I don’t know what I’d expected. We were certainly not friends, and yet I thought of myself as something deeper than a colleague. Chewing on the word as she was reeling off their names, I missed them all and simply nodded pleasantly.

All the women’s choice of clothing was about the same as mine, and I took comfort in the fact that I was not the odd one out. They were even wearing boots,

Glenna in red rubber ones with a picture of Big Bird on each side. The women's banter about them gave me the impression that she wore those silly things every year. "Well now that everybody's here, including Big Bird," a tall brunette with striking hazel eyes teased, "I guess we may as well get started. Do we all have a basket?" Ransacking my mind for something I could use, I shook my head and feigned a study of the stones. "Yeah I always forget too, but this year I brought some extras." She rummaged in her car. The other women did the same. Unfolding herself, she produced two Easter baskets, one hot pink and the other neon blue. "One for you and one for me. Pick a color." She suggested, shoving the bright blue one closer to me. "I charge more for plastic grass, and you don't even want to know how much I ask for a coconut egg." Her top front teeth overlapped. I was immediately at ease. I decided on the blue. "Okay, let's go."

The moment I stepped from the gravel of the lot, I understood why the others had worn boots. The field was stubble and mud, the product of three rainy days. Used to walking along concrete, I hadn't planned for that. Nonetheless, a sort of arrogance seeped into my gait. My boots made up for having failed to bring a basket.

Making self-conscious jokes about housework and jobs, we slogged across the field of muck, each woman working to prove that she was not out of breath from the exertion of each step. I learned the woman of the baskets was called Beverly Anne, that she was Catholic and a radiologist. They called the small blonde Jessica. I liked her spoon-on-wineglass voice. She was a server at a restaurant in town. We had a Tricia and a Kim, a black and Asian pair of lovers, one an artist and the other an accountant. Carolyn, the bashful one, belied her flaming orange hair with her gentle dusky voice and quiet manner. Jane, the cellist, informed me in a honey-colored drawl that Carolyn was a cartoonist for the local weekly paper. "Did you see the one she did about the elf and Santa Claus? It was too good! I put in on my face book page." The final stranger, I discovered, was called Pamela, like me. But, unlike me, she was tall and dark and broad. I didn't learn what she did. I didn't learn nearly enough, since at the wood line we all hushed and simply listened to the sounds—the rustling leap of a squirrel, a pecker hammering a trunk, the scolding crows, the crack of wood as a branch fell. Resting for a moment, we all gazed at the trees, soaking up the morning sun and woodland beauty. Oaks and sycamores and maples, newly budded, stretched before us like a curtain hiding miracles and menace.

Using simple signs and touches, we conversed without words, as though silence had been part of the plan. Slowly making our way through the shadows' lattice work, placing feet between the nascent ferns and vines, we filled our lungs with the heady scent of decomposing leaves and warmed our backs on the sunlight slanting through.

Safely tucked inside my boots and jeans and tee shirt and hat and in the shelter of the women's company, I was able to ignore my natural fear of all things wild and, so gradually that I almost didn't notice the change, I was able to relax in the exotic, timeless place. I liked the scratching sound our feet made when we scraped them through the leaves. I liked the boulders wedged between the gnarled roots. I found an

eerie kind of beauty in the abstract designs of the twigs and pinecones strewn across the ground. I even found comfort in the hooting of an owl hiding somewhere in the distant twining branches. All the sights and sounds I found in that mysterious place were so strange yet, like the women, they embraced me.

In the heart of the forest, we discovered our goal—a profusion of mushrooms extravagantly studding the carpet of wet and rotting leaves. They were crimson and coral and dandelion yellow, feather white and faded peridot green. A solitary one looked like mother of pearl. I bent to touch it. It was satiny and cool. They were baby dress frilly and as plain as a thumb. Some were smaller than my little fingernail. A few were as big as my brother's catcher's mitt. Most were bold, but some hid under the leaves. A few were lying on their sides, most likely rudely uprooted when an inattentive creature scurried by. As if we were a single person, we collectively gasped and reverently crouched to gaze at them.

They were the reason for our quest, yet no one moved to harvest them. We simply stared, drawing breath and slowly letting it out as if the mushrooms held the secrets of our souls. We could not harm a single one. They were far too much like us—convened at random and yet perfectly arranged. Though they were different in color and in shape and in size, though they'd been blown on the four winds haphazardly, they lived in perfect harmony, each complementing the other, each with a message about peace and love and faith. To have taken one away would have diminished them all. And so we merely honored them in awestruck silence.

We knew that in a few days they would shrivel and die, as does everything that lives upon the earth. But in that womb of sun and shade, of all that's fleeting yet eternal, we had made a conscious choice to let them have their precious hours and, at the proper time, to die in dignity.

I've never been much of a singer, but I felt the need to chant, making up the words and tune as I went. And Jennifer, the atheist crouching by my side, harmonized as if she'd heard the hymn before. One by one the others joined us—the Christians and the Jew, the Buddhist convert, and the one who was still searching. We were a circle, a coven, singing praises to the mushrooms we had planned to take to simmer in a stew.

The chanting thinned and, like the mushrooms, faded to a natural death. We were complete. We all had found what we had come for. Without a word we returned to the soggy fallow field, blinking in the gaudy glare of midday sun. I hugged each woman as we parted, each one to her own car, each one to the tasks of ordinary life.

And yet I could not drive away. Although the moment had passed, I had to understand the meaning of it all. I had to gather all the details—every scent and sound and hue—and make it breathe so I could live it all again. I don't know how long I sat before I finally understood that I had to tell the story to my mother.

I found her sitting by her window looking thin and parchment frail. I hadn't noticed until then how old she was. She had been beautiful once, her skin like mother of pearl, her shiny hair as thick and satiny as fur. She looked around at my step. I stitched a smile to my face.

"Well, you're a mess. Where have you been?' Her eyes still sparkled impishly.

"Been with the mushrooms." I knelt down beside her chair.

"Well, I'll be damned." She shook her head. Her face erupted in pride. Then something else. Was it concern? I couldn't tell. "Are you okay? You look so strange, like you've just seen the face of God."

"I think I have." I touched her cheek and told my tale.



Campfire Cooking by Chelle Cordero

One of the things I really enjoyed as a Girl Scout troop leader was cooking over the campfire during our campouts. Here is my favorite dinner “recipe”:

Tin-Foil Pockets: (recipe for 1 serving, make as many as you need)

You’ll need filling(s), heavy-duty foil, small shovel, fire-gloves, and tongs.

3 oz ground beef
1 small potato, sliced (peeling optional)
1/2 cup peas and carrots (canned or frozen/thawed)
thin slice of onion, cut up
tomato wedge, cut up (or 2 cherry tomatoes cut up)
salt and pepper to taste
margarine

2 layers heavy-duty foil in approximate 1-foot square pieces

Start your campfires, it’s important to let the fire burn down to a bed of hot coals. Lay out your foil, smear a small pat of margarine in the center of the inside square (shiny side in). Just off center, place almost half of the potato and the onion, cover with ground beef shaped into a patty and seasoned with salt and pepper to taste, cover with peas and carrots, tomato, and the remainder of the potato. Place another small pat of margarine on top of the potato.

Fold the foil into a triangle with the filling inside. Fold the edges of the foil a minimum of 2 to 3 times to seal in the juices.

Use a small metal shovel to make room in the hot coals. Place each pocket in the coals and cover with more hot coals. Cooks in about 30-minutes. Remove pockets using tongs and gloves.

Note: Open the pockets carefully, use gloves, as hot steam will escape. Diners can eat out of the foil pocket or empty the filling into a dish.

One of the best things about this style of cooking is the versatility. Make individual combinations depending on preference.

Substitute 3-ounces of the following for the ground beef patty: 3 ounces of ground pork/lamb/turkey; 3 ounces of chicken breast cut up into bite size pieces; 3 ounces of salmon/tuna/tofu in chunks.

Substitute $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of cooked rice for the small potato; or a small cut up sweet potato.

You can use any mixed vegetables including carrots, corn, water chestnuts, snap peas, etc.

Add fresh onions, garlic, tomato, green pepper or canned mushrooms as desired.

Save any “liquid seasoning” like ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, soy sauce or mustard after the contents are cooked and served.

If you are cooking with the kids, they’ll love adding their own choice ingredients. Tin foil cooking is an EXPERIENCE and a great taste sensation!

Critters and Creatures Word Search

by S.R. Claridge

A L L L I D V I N L F N G T H
I N G S O R E A L I R Y O N E
A C H N O T I H E S O R F O W
G N K X X B V V E S G C X Z E
Z E D X I D L E Z O N E O K D
Y Z J H R Y D S D F N Q O W K
I P P G R X G J E X L P B T O
Q M F Q A A A O E L I T P E R
A Z D N W P C Z L S H A R K C
D B V B Y A F C E O X F R D H
H T N A C A L E O C O S I Y X
F I S H Z K C L T O K Z N B G
K A N G A R O O D D N H T F G
A L V T W W G P Z S E S R O H
H W H Q L F C P W E P J E Q K

AMPHIBIAN
COELACANTH
COW
DONKEY
FISH
FOSSIL
FROG
HORSE
KANGAROO
OWL
OXEN
RACCOON
REPTILE
SHARK
ZOOLOGY

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Awakening **by Melinda Clayton**

Many millions of years ago a great beast cruised through the waters in search of food. His name was Galeocerdo, and he was greatly feared, not only by the other water-dwellers but by the landbuend, the ones who lived on land. Such was his reputation for carnage that the landbuend dared not enter his lair; even Entelodont, the vicious devil pig, ruler of the land, confined his hunting to swamplands, far away from Galeocerdo, leaving Galeocerdo to terrorize the waters on his own.

Though not beautiful by modern standards, Galeocerdo was nonetheless magnificent, powerful and sleek, nearly eighteen feet long and weighing over two thousand pounds. His flesh was pitted and scarred, fitting for the aged warrior he was. Galeocerdo had ruled the waters for thirty years, establishing his dominance among the weaker and smaller fish and fathering literally hundreds of young.

Galeocerdo was not evil, though he was often described as such. No, Galeocerdo simply lived as he was designed to live. He swam, he ate, he mated. He fulfilled his purpose and kept the waters clean by scavenging, by consuming the dead and the decaying. True, he killed, but only when he needed to, in order to eat or to survive, and even then he did so only with purpose, not with malice.

But now, Galeocerdo was very old, and he was tired. He knew that it was only a matter of time until he lost a battle, sinking to the bottom of the ocean with his defeat. There, he would die, eventually becoming one with the earth. Over time, nothing would be left of him, as if he'd never existed at all. Except....

“Mom!” The little boy’s face was excited, framed against the blue of the sky, his honey-colored hair blowing in the coastal breeze. He squatted at the shoreline, the sand shovel carelessly thrown aside in the excitement of the discovery. “Mom!” he called again. “I think I’ve got one!”

“Let me see!” This, the little brother, tossing his own sand shovel aside and running to his brother. “He did! Mom, he’s got one!”

And then the mother, picking her way over the rocks, setting her own sand shovel down carefully. Holding back her hair with one hand, she bent over for a look. “You sure did,” she confirmed, smiling at the boys. “Look at that!” The little boys beamed in the golden afternoon sunlight.

“Honey!” The mom stood, shading her eyes from the sun and searching the beach for the dad. Spotting him, she cupped her hands and called “He found one!”

“He found one?” The dad came, splashing to shore and jogging towards the family. He squatted down for a look, whistled under his breath. “It’s even still serrated, see?” He held the ancient shark tooth up for a better look. It glinted blackly in the sun, fossilized after millions of years against the ocean floor. “A tiger shark, it looks like. A big one, too. Just think,” he said, pushing his sunglasses up on his head and looking at the boys. “At one time, millions of years ago, this tooth belonged to a shark that swam in this very ocean.”

He returned the tooth to the boy’s outstretched hand, and the family sat in silence for a moment, caught up in the discovery, imagining the ancient beast that had at one time ruled the waters.



Man's Complacency

(reprinted from *Nature's Gifts Anthology*, VHP 2010)

by Victoria Howard

A heavy fog rolled in along the Strait of Juan de Fuca, catching everyone, including the weathermen, by surprise. By early evening it covered the coastline from Port Angeles in the west, to Seattle and Tacoma in the east, and as far north as Anacortes. Traffic on the freeway slowed to a crawl. Planes were grounded, and ships were confined to port or instructed by the coast guard to keep station and wait for the fog to disperse.

Most residents of the Pacific Northwest were used to the fogbanks that settled over their cities in spring and autumn, but this fog was different. Thick and cloying, it hung heavily in the air, covering everything in a fine mist and reducing visibility to a matter of yards. Formed when a warm air mass moved over a colder area, the fog hung around for days, and resulted in a backlog of shipping. Ships' masters, desperate to keep to schedule to avoid lost revenue and additional operating costs, often became frustrated, over self-confident and complacent.

Joe McCabe, head of the Department of Fish and Wildlife, had just finished breakfast the following morning when his cell phone rang.

"McCabe."

"Hi Joe, it's Steve Jones from the Department of Ecology. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"I was just about to leave for the office. What gives, Steve?"

"Just thought I'd give you a heads up. A seine netter out of Anacortes has reported seeing an oil slick in the Rosario Strait. The skipper was about to put his nets out when he spotted it. He thought it was fairly well localized, but I've asked the coast guard to send up a spotter plane to check it out. But this darned fog is making things difficult. In the meantime, I want you to take charge of any cleanup operation."

Joe rubbed his bald head. “Why not use someone from your department?”

“Because all I have is Bryant, who joined us only a couple of months ago, and I need someone with experience.”

“I see. With any luck the slick will be small enough to disperse, but better ask the coast guard to fax me a list of vessels that went through the strait in the last forty-eight hours. While we wait for news, I’ll contact the oil spill team and have them standby. Have ... what’s his name? Oh, yeah, Bryant. Have him meet me in my office in an hour.”

“Her. Bryant is a woman.”

“No kidding?”

“No kidding.”

McCabe hung up without another word. The last thing he needed was some namby-pamby woman traipsing around him in a day-glow survival suit.

Thanks to a jack-knifed truck on the I-90, the drive from his home on Mercer Island to downtown Seattle took nearly forty minutes. While he waited for the cops to clear the freeway, McCabe thought about the last major oil spill he’d been involved with. Twenty-five years before, the Exxon Valdez had dumped approximately ten million gallons—one-fifth of her cargo of crude oil—in Prince William Sound, Alaska. He’d been part of one of the many cleanup crews tasked to remove the clumps of oil from the shoreline. The memory of the devastation had lived with him ever since, which was why he’d been a driving force behind the state’s oil spill contingency plan. He just hoped he wouldn’t have to implement it now.

When he reached his office, a slim young woman with her hair up in a silky blonde ponytail stood as he entered.

“Mister McCabe?” She extended a hand. “Faith Bryant, Department of Ecology.”

McCabe paused before he shook her hand, then stepped back from the door and motioned her to take a seat. “You’d better come in. Steve Jones tells me this is your first spill investigation.”

“That’s right. I studied marine biology and wrote my thesis on the challenges facing Puget Sound. Steve thought it would be good experience for me to be part of the investigation and cleanup process.”

McCabe thought about his friend, Jedediah Walker, another marine biologist. They’d worked together on a number of investigations and projects over the years. Right now he could do with Walker’s expertise rather than this pretty young woman straight out of college. But Walker and his wife, Skye, were in China helping the Chinese government investigate the reason why the Yangtze River dolphin had become extinct.

“Well, listen carefully and learn. Any news on the slick or what vessel might have caused it?”

“Unfortunately, yes. The McMinnville, a tanker headed for the refinery at Cherry Point, failed to pick up a pilot at Port Angeles. At the time, the coast guard tried to raise her on the radio, but got no response. Around midnight, the third mate reported that the engine had failed and the vessel was drifting out of control in the Rosario Strait.”

McCabe knew that hundreds of ships and ferries passed through Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the Rosario Strait every day. Add commercial fishing boats and pleasure craft into the mix, and the fishing lanes of Puget Sound were the busiest in the nation. In good conditions it could take a tanker more than a mile to stop. But with no means of propulsion, the McMinnville was at the mercy of the wind and tide.

“Did the third mate give any reason as to why they didn’t stop and take on a pilot?” he asked.

“No, but my guess is the crew was trying to make up time, and the dense fog put them even further behind schedule. According to the manager at Cherry Point Refinery, the McMinnville was due to dock around five this morning.”

“Does the coast guard have any idea where she is now?”

Faith shook her head. “They tried to raise her on the radio, but got no response. Other ships in the area have been instructed to keep a lookout and report any sighting. But given the last reported location, I think the McMinnville is the most likely candidate.”

McCabe’s fist hit the desk. “I wish these oil companies would learn that sailing from Alaska to a refinery and back every eight days is too risky. The Rosario Strait is the busiest and most dangerous tanker route in the state. It also contains the richest concentration of sea birds, marine mammals, and commercial fish farms.”

“So how are you going to handle this?”

“As soon as we receive confirmation from the spotter plane, I’ll dispatch two spill response barges to the scene from Anacortes. They’ll deploy booms to try and contain any oil. Teams are standing by on Lopez and Decatur Islands with dispersant in case any comes ashore. If need be, I’ll set up a forward command post in Anacortes.”

“Sounds like a plan. How about contacting the volunteers on the San Juans to let them know they might have an influx of oiled birds to deal with?”

“Good idea,” McCabe said, and pushed the phone toward her. “When you’re done, we’ll head over to the coast guard station; there’s a chopper waiting to fly us over the scene. I want to see firsthand what we’re dealing with.”

Within twenty minutes of leaving the office, McCabe and Bryant had climbed aboard the coast guard helicopter. A young airman handed them both headsets and made sure they were safely strapped in as the large machine lifted off and headed north toward the site of the slick. As he peered through the window at the retreating city, McCabe hoped that the low cloud and lingering patches of fog wouldn’t hinder their search.

As with any oil or chemical spill, time was of the essence. If Faith's hunch was correct and the McMinnville was responsible, then oil had been seeping into the ocean for at least twelve hours—more than enough time for it to spread and endanger any wildlife it encountered.

As the helicopter approached the Rosario Strait, the pilot reduced height and dropped down through the cloud base until the aircraft was no more than two hundred feet above the waves.

McCabe keyed the send button on his mike and turned to Faith. "You know what to look for. I'll take the port side; you check starboard. If you spot anything, let me know, and we'll go in for a closer look." He lifted a pair of binoculars to his eyes and started scanning the ocean.

For nearly an hour they scoured the ocean, but there was just mile upon mile of blue-green water. As they flew over Watmough Bay on Lopez Island, Faith suddenly called out.

"There! About one o'clock. Can you see it?"

McCabe crossed to her window and looked out. Sure enough, he could see the telltale black sheen of oil floating on the surface.

"Pilot," McCabe shouted, "how far are we from the McMinnville's last reported position?"

"Ten miles, sir."

McCabe thought for a moment. "Pass the coordinates onto the spill response vessels. Tell them I want them on site ASAP and an advisory sent to all vessels to avoid the area until further notice."

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"Can we maintain this height and follow that slick north?"

"Sure, although the ride might get a little bumpy."

"We'll cope," replied McCabe.

Faith tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to face her.

"This isn't right," she said pointing down. "There's too much oil. Couldn't have come from a fishing boat."

McCabe nodded gloomily. "Do we know how much crude the McMinnville was carrying?"

Faith consulted her notebook. "Approximately thirty-five million gallons."

"Do we know when the McMinnville was built? And what about her hull construction?"

Faith consulted her notes once more. "First registered in nineteen eighty-nine. Had several owners since then. Refitted two years ago. Single-hulled construction and only one power source for her single propeller. She spent six months in dry dock in

Taiwan in two thousand three after a crack in her hull was discovered.”

“Sounds like the current owners should have scrapped her years ago.”

The helicopter continued northward. Beneath the fuselage, the oil spread out across the strait like a dark ribbon. By the time they reached the tip of Cypress Island, McCabe knew he had a major incident on his hands. He just hoped he could prevent it from becoming a catastrophe.

They located the tanker beached on the Buckeye Shoal, a jagged reef hidden beneath forty-eight feet of water about halfway between Orcas and Sinclair Islands. McCabe peered down at the stricken vessel and estimated she’d lost at least a third of her cargo. Listing heavily to starboard, oil spewed out of her tanks. Driven along by the strong current, it wouldn’t be long before it reached land.

“Okay. I’ve seen enough. Take us back,” McCabe instructed the pilot. He turned to Faith. “If you’ve got any plans for the next month, cancel them. You’ll be spending the next few weeks in Anacortes helping to monitor the cleanup operation.”

Early next morning, McCabe flew out to one of the response barges to see the effects of the spill for himself. Salvage experts had examined the McMinnville and reported that five of the eight tanks on board had ruptured. Nearly one-fifth of her cargo was lost—approximately seven million gallons of crude oil.

The stench of oil drifted over the ocean. A thick film floated on the water, but the tourists clinging to the rails of a ferry bound for Orcas Island didn’t seem to notice. They were too busy talking about the football scores to worry about the affects of the oil spill on the environment and wildlife.

Unable to bridle the anger in his voice, McCabe turned to Schultz, who was in charge of deploying the forty-inch boom around the McMinnville.

“How long before you can get the skimmers in the water?”

“Another day—two at most. We’re transferring the remaining oil from the undamaged tanks to barges. Once that’s done, we can close the boom, activate the skimmers, and suck up the oil. I’ve got additional barges standing by ready to transfer it to the refinery.”

McCabe clapped the man on the shoulder. “Okay, but I want that boom completed and the skimmers operational within eighteen hours.”

“With respect, Mister McCabe, that’s an awfully tight schedule.”

The deck beneath McCabe’s feet pitched to port and then starboard as the vessel rolled with the current. “There’s a storm front moving in sometime in the next thirty-six hours. If it hits, and the oils turn to mousse, the booms and skimmers will be less effective, and not even dispersants will dissipate it then.”

Schultz followed McCabe onto the bridge. “We could always try a test burn. I read they did that when the Exxon Valdez ran aground.”

“We’d have to deploy a fire boom and tow it behind two ships. Do you really think we could do it in the time?”

“It’s worth a try, Mister McCabe. A controlled burn might reduce several thousand gallons to a few hundred, and the residue would be easy to collect. We’ve got the boom; we just need two extra vessels.”

Minutes ticked away as McCabe considered the suggestion. It had worked in Alaska, so why not in Rosario Strait? “Okay, get on the radio to Bryant in Anacortes. Tell her to get in touch with the Northwest Fishing Association to see if any of the local fishing fleet can help. In the meantime, I’ll go ashore and check on the situation there.”

The scene that greeted McCabe when he arrived at Doe Bay on Orcas Island was one of devastation. Dark, patchy clumps of oil clung to every rock and boulder. Men in bright yellow biohazard suits shoveled it into plastic bags while others sprayed dispersant.

Overhead a helicopter circled, no doubt filming the scene for the evening news. The local TV station, along with Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, had criticized the state’s response to the incident and were calling for the resignation of those in charge, despite the fact his department had reacted promptly and was doing everything it could to contain the oil.

But the cleanup had come too late. Seabirds unable to fish because their plumage was clogged with the black, sticky substance sat on rocks, trying in vain to clean their feathers. Volunteers from the Island Oil Spill Association and members of the Oiled Wildlife Care Network combed the beach and collected as many as they could. They would be transported to the nearest center for treatment and eventual rehabilitation. But for others, it was too late. Heavily contaminated, they had lost their struggle for life.

It was a heartbreaking sight, and many volunteers wiped tears from their eyes as they carried out their grim task.

Seals and sea otters were affected too, but it would be a while before their bodies were carried ashore by the tide.

McCabe glanced at his watch. The crew of the McMinnville would be questioned by the coast guard in less than two hours, and that was one meeting he wanted to sit in on. He made his way back up the beach to the waiting helicopter.

By the time he reached the coast guard station, Captain Rivera, the master of the McMinnville, was being questioned by John Davis of the U.S. Coast Guard. McCabe slipped into an empty chair at the back of the room.

“Captain Rivera,” said Davis. “Care to explain why you failed to take on a pilot at Port Angeles?”

“I was off duty. When I realized what had happened, it was too late to turn back.”

“That doesn’t account for why you also failed to heed the weather advisory.”

“Never heard it. The radio set must have been playing up.”

“You’re supposed to carry a spare.”

“We don’t. And as to why, well, you’ll have to take that up with the owners.”

“The third mate tells me you were in your cabin when the McMinnville ran aground. Is that correct?”

“Yeah. I’d gone below to rest.”

Davis held the captain’s gaze. “He said you’d been drinking,”

“I ... that’s a lie.”

“Captain Rivera, you’re facing criminal and civil charges. It would be better for all concerned if you told the truth.”

“All right, so I had a drink. I’d left the third mate in charge. It’s his fault, not mine.”

McCabe jumped to his feet. “Damn it man, as ship’s master you’re responsible for the safety of the vessel and everyone on board. Do you have any idea of the devastation you’ve caused?”

“So a few seabirds and some fish got killed. It’s no big deal.”

“It’s not just a few seabirds—it’s thousands. And common seals and sea otters too. Then there’s the hundreds of miles of coastline contaminated with oil because you were below in your cabin having a drink! Do you have any idea how long it will take the environment to recover? Years! In the meantime, the communities around Puget Sound and the San Juan Islands will lose millions of dollars in income.”

“Thank you, Mister McCabe. I think Captain Rivera understands the gravity of the situation,” said Davis.

McCabe pointed to the captain. “Look at him. He doesn’t care, and neither do the McMinnville’s owners. If they did, they wouldn’t have left an incompetent drunk in charge of a twenty-year-old tanker that should have been scrapped years ago.”

“That’s enough, McCabe. You can tell it to the court at the appropriate time,” said Davis. He turned to Rivera. “I’m placing you and the third mate under arrest.”

Six months later, McCabe stood on a rise overlooking the beach at Doe Bay. While the environment and wildlife was slowly recovering, the impact of the spill would be felt for years to come. One good thing had come out of the disaster. The state had finally agreed with the coast guard’s recommendation that all tankers should be fitted with double hulls and walls and fitted bow thrusters to help with maneuverability. While such safety measures would cost a great deal of money and take years to implement, they were nothing compared to the cost of the cleanup.

The McMinnville’s owners, along with the captain and third mate, had admitted liability. They would appear in court next month and could expect a hefty fine and jail

sentence.

Below him, a member of the Oiled Wildlife Care Network stepped forward and released a pair of Thayer's gulls; their distinctive pale gray, white, and black plumage once more pristine. The gulls circled the beach, their raucous cries filling the air. McCabe waited until they disappeared from view, then walked back to his car. His friend Walker was right; his generation could no longer afford to be complacent. They had to protect the environment for generations to come.



Fun Around the Campfire

by Chelle Cordero

Yes, this is the perfect time to share scary stories ~ but sleeping in the woods might be a touch dicey after that!

I love sitting around the campfire and singing songs. If anyone plays guitar or harmonica, ask them to bring their musical instrument along. Otherwise acapella (no music accompaniment) sounds beautiful and harmonious (even if you are a little off key).

One of my favorite songs is Barges:

Out of my window looking at the night
I can see the barges flickering light.
Silently flows the river to the sea
and the barges too flow silently.

Refrain

Barges I would like to go with you
I would like to sail the oceans blue.
Barges, have you treasures in your hold
Do you fight with pirates brave and bold.

Out of my window looking at the night
I can see the barges flickering light.
Starboard shines green and the port is glowing red,
I can see the barges up ahead.

Refrain.

*If you would like to hear the tune, there is a You Tube video at
<http://youtu.be/dF2i6RQUqAE>



Music of The Indian Canyons

by Smoky Trudeau

The first thing I notice on arriving at my destination is the music of water dancing over rock. This is the music that sets my soul dancing, that makes my feet fly down the hillside to get a look at the stream making such a lovely noise. I am not disappointed:

Where am I, would you think? In the mountains, beside a sparkling stream roaring down from the highest peak? No—the mountains are buried in snow; it will be several months before we can hike there again.

No, this spectacular stream that sings to me, that smells of earth and spring and ancient secrets, is in the middle of one of the hottest deserts in the United States. This is the tribal land of the Agua Caliente band of Indians, the Indian Canyons of Palm Springs, a spectacular oasis of native California fan palms in the middle of a low desert wonderland of cactus and rock.

We—my husband Scott and I—head up the trail into the canyon. The palms are immense; I cannot look up at them scraping the sky without getting dizzy. I never imagined palms grew in forests, but that does indeed describe this wilderness. We slip silently among the trees and the rocks, too awestruck by their grandeur to speak. I feel ghosts silently guiding us, and am comforted.

The trail winds out of the palm oasis and into the desert, and my eyes immediately dart to movement off to our right. It is a granite spiny lizard, the largest lizard I have ever seen in the wild. He is immense, at least two feet long, and fat as my wrist. He pauses in the shadows for a moment, giving me just enough time to shoot a quick photo, before disappearing into the brush.

Another twenty yards down the trail, we encounter another of these beautiful lizards. This one is not so secretive; he seems to be striking a pose, and I happily oblige. Our photo session ends abruptly when a small insect makes the misstep of landing on the rock just inches from my model. In a flash he turns, and in a blur, his tongue darts out. The hapless insect is no more.

It is getting hot; the sun is high in the sky, and the temperature is probably in the mid-eighties. Come August, the temperature at this time of day can easily be 120-degrees in Palm Springs. I realize that, for the first time in months, my feet are warm.

Barrel cactus dot the landscape. Aptly named, these are the biggest barrels I have ever seen, easily the same size I am. They are so perfectly formed, so symmetrical. It's too early for them to be in bloom, but there are buds swelling; in another few weeks, this desert is going to explode in color.

We wind back into the palm oasis, get in our car, and head up the road to the next canyon. Looking behind us, the palm oasis sits nestled against the base of the snow-covered Mt. San Jacinto. I remember: it is February, still winter, even here in California.

The trail into Palm Canyon follows yet another singing stream, and we pad along quietly. There is no need to talk out here; better to listen to what Mother Nature has to say. Ravens warn of our approach; mockingbirds and cactus wrens and finches fuss noisily. I choose to believe their songs are welcoming us, not trying to chase us away.

The trail suddenly turns toward the stream and disappears, only to re-emerge on the other side. We pause only a moment before slipping out of our shoes and socks, rolling up our jeans, and plunging into the frigid water. Cold shoots up my legs, up my spine, numbs my mind before I splash out of the water on the far side of the creek. I have creek-stomped in February. I am exhilarated!

On this side, the trail is pure sand; we don't bother to put our shoes back on our wet feet, choosing instead to enjoy the feeling of the cool sand slipping through our toes. We follow the stream to a small waterfall that crashes through the rocks. A large, flat rock beckons from the middle of the stream below the falls. We plunge back into the water and curl up in the warm sun on the rock. I think of the ancients who once walked these canyons, whose ghosts have accompanied us on our hike. How many of them sat on this very rock? Did they have a snack, a cool drink of water; did they turn their faces toward the sun and rejoice at the return of warmth, as are we are doing now? Did they sing a silent prayer of gratitude to the earth for allowing them the privilege of living in Eden?

Earth mother, giver of life, we thank you for your many blessings. May you be ever honored, and your wild things preserved.



Make Your Own Coffee Can Campstove **by Chelle Cordero**

You'll need a 2 or 3 pound empty coffee can with one open end, a can punch, a pair of metal cutting shears, and work gloves. Optional is a wire hanger (the kind with the removable cardboard tube). Also a small open can (size-like for tuna fish).

Use the can punch to make 8 to 12 fairly evenly spaced holes around the top SIDE of the coffee can (the top is the closed end). Using the cutting shears AND wearing work gloves, cut a 3 by 3 inch square out of the bottom side of the coffee can. If you want to make a handle (not my choice), use the wire hanger without the cardboard tube, stick the open ends into opposite punched holes near the top of the can and bend the wire so it won't come out but is still loose enough to pivot.

Be sure to use the camp stove on the dirt ground and away from brush that could catch. Build a small fire (I like using the empty tuna can as a fire pit) and place the camp stove over the flame.

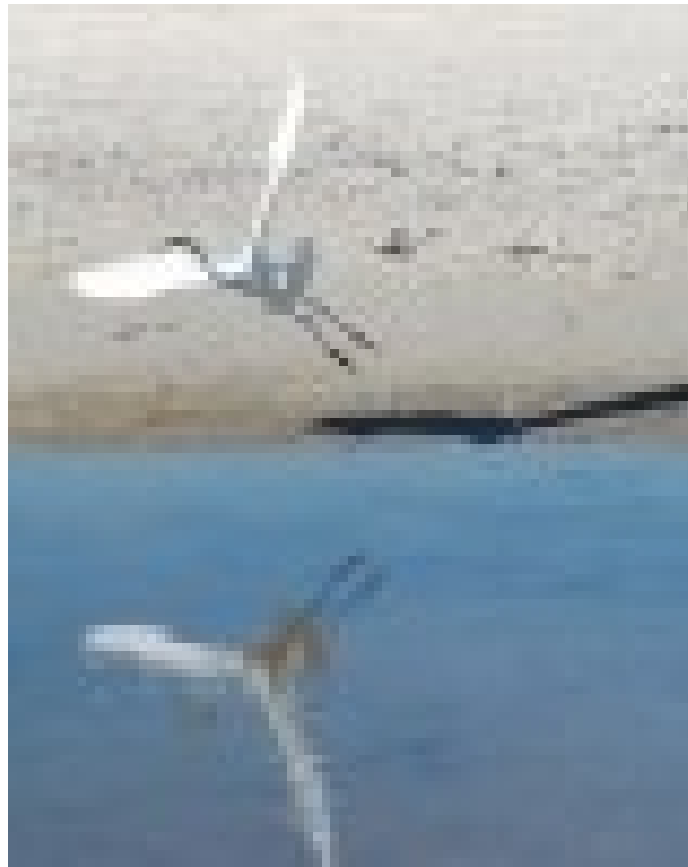
Make sure the can top is clean and use it just like a griddle surface – using a SMALL amount of butter, the best tasting pancakes I ever had was made on a camp stove just like this. Caution, be careful not to use the camp stove with greasy or fat dripping foods as this can cause the flame to catch.

Celebrate Earth Day 2011

By S.R. Claridge

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Unscramble each of the clue words.
Copy the letters in the numbered cells to other cells with the same number.



Remember When **by Charmaine Gordon**

I'm an author. There are lots of us roaming the earth with stories cooking in our heads like double lives. We aren't alike except for our passion and imagination. We can be found in all shapes and sizes like snowflakes, each different. One thing I've learned is everyone has a story to tell but it takes work, determination, and a lot of love to find the words and put them together. Imagine my surprise on a sun drenched beach while spending time with my three and a half year old granddaughter to find at her tender age, she too had a story to tell.

"Granny, Granny, remember when we came here last year when I was a baby?" my golden haired grandestchild said as we walked over the dunes and saw the ocean.

A gust of Atlantic Ocean wind blew the pail she held right out of her small fist and she ran to get it. Hard to run through sand but she did and kept on running. It wouldn't be easy keeping up with her this time and we were staying for a week. Not exactly a restful vacation. Since she'd had her third birthday a few months ago, ever the optimist I hoped for the best. My daughter looked forward to the three generations spending a joyful time together.

Julie settled us near the shore, lathered sunscreen on all as if I no longer knew how, then Cassie took me by one hand, shovels in the other and dragged me to water's edge.

"Dig," she said. "Dig a deep hole like you did last time and I'll tell you a story."

I ask you, who could refuse an offer like this? So I, also a year older, dug a deep hole, and we sat in wet sand, not my favorite, my grandestchild and I with the sun shining, sea gulls cawing, dolphins playing not far from Cape May shore, and she began.

"Once upon a time," she said peering up from under a purple sun proof hat bigger than her, "there was a little baby and her best Granny and they went to the beach. But the baby got scared of the big water and waves so guess what happened?" Mischief in the blue eyes as she gave me a sideways glance.

"A fairy came and picked up the baby?" I said, trying to look serious when I wanted to give her the moon and stars and for me to live forever to watch over and teach her what she'd need to know always.

"No, Granny. That's not what happened. Listen." She leaned close enough for me to inhale her sweetness plus the sunscreen, knowing I didn't hear as well as I used to and spoke very loud. Loud enough to attract two older boys digging nearby. They edged closer.

"The problem was the baby needed someone to help her not be afraid and that someone was her Granny." She giggled. I laughed and the boys joined in. She loves an audience. I can't take credit for her gift of language. Her mom, my daughter, is a teacher.

"What happened next?" the older boy said.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Pete and this little guy is my cousin, Sam. I'm six. He's five."

"I'm three and a half," Cassie said. "This is Granny. C'mon. I'll share her."

Great. Now I'm to be handed from kid to kid like an old rag doll.

"Tell what happened to the baby," Pete said.

She dimpled up with all the attention. "The baby cried so Granny dug a deep hole. See?" She pointed to the water-filled hole I'd dug before we sat down. The boys looked in and I guess they thought it was swell because their heads bobbed up and down with approval. "Then the ocean wave came in and filled the hole so it didn't look so scary anymore and soon the baby stopped crying and jumped in and played and she wasn't scared anymore." She patted my sticky leg with her sandy hand. "This is the Granny in the story and I was the little baby from last year and this," she pointed to the hole, "is the same hole."

"Wow, what a great story," Pete said.

"Yeah," Sam said. "Can we play?"

"Okay," she said.

Somehow I stood up and creaked my way to our piece of real estate for the day where Julie stretched out with my latest book. "I love this one," she said. Looking up, a crease formed in her perfect brow.

Uh Oh. Daughter had the worry about Mom look.

She dug into the insulated bag. “Time for juice, Mom. Eat a banana. Remember when you almost fainted one time on the beach in Florida and I saved you with a banana and water?”

Smiling, I nodded. Fifteen years before. The kid had a memory like an elephant. “Yes, I remember.” She almost killed me ten times over since then but who’s counting. Somehow our roles have reversed. I’m no longer capable, she thinks, and Cassie is also watching out for the old bag of bones.

I carried the banana peel to the waste bin a distance from our spot, stretched and made my way back bumping into a man flying a huge kite.

“Sorry. I wasn’t looking.”

“My fault,” he said, “I paid more attention to you than to the kite.” It crashed to the sand.

Did he really say what I thought he said? Not possible. I continued to walk a little straighter, sucked in the gut, swayed the old hips just a bit.

He caught up with me. Gray hair askew, tan, laughing dark eyes. Not bad.

“Are you staying near the beach?” he said.

“What’s your name?”

“George Martin from New York. Widowed in good health and would enjoy some company. How about you?”

“I’m with my daughter and granddaughter for the week. We’re renting a nice house close by.”

“I’m staying with my family also.” He pointed to the shore. “See the two little boys? Grandsons. I don’t know who the girl is.”

A sign. “My granddaughter. She was telling me a story and the boys joined us.”

“A story? She looks too young to tell stories.”

“Oh George, don’t you know everyone has a story?”

We talked all the way to the shore where he met my family. We talked the whole week of vacation and I do believe we’ll continue our conversations for many years and laugh about the day he crashed his kite.

I picture the cover of my next book. A beach scene, kite flying, an older couple meeting by chance.

If Dreams Are Born Here **by Malcolm R. Campbell**

If dreams are born in this wide valley,
Yellow and green and rolling
Upon the moraines and terraces
Left by late Pleistocene Ice,
If dreams are born here,

If dreams are born here
And guarded by boundaries and golden eagles
Along the continent's shining crown
Where life is nurtured with the Earth's blood,
If dreams are born here,

If dreams are born here
And populated with herds and dogs,
And if these dreams are wide enough and deep enough
To survive perverse seasons and storms,
And the influx of the alien rich,
The monopolistic greed that steals away sheep,
The coming of rules and roads,
The disappearance of haystackers
And the men who built them,
The cancerous creep of houses and shopping centres,
The edicts of skyscraper capitalists
Who do not feel the land's pulse,
And the random strokes of plain bad luck,
If dreams are born and raised here,

Then with these dreams
A man can grow tall
And temper himself with good work
And find his natural place
In the order of other small things
And become most holy
When he sings what he sees into the world
With his own true voice.



Campfire S'Mores

by Chelle Cordero

There is nothing more satisfying than finishing off a great campfire meal with S'mores.

You'll need full size marshmallows, chocolate bars, graham crackers, and several long "green" branches.

Prepare 2 squares of graham crackers and a piece of chocolate broken off of the candy bar (the chocolate should be smaller than the crackers). Put a marshmallow securely on the tip of a branch and roast the marshmallow to a deep golden brown (or even blackened if preferred). You might have to blow out the fire of a flaming marshmallow!

Holding one graham cracker and chocolate in one hand, put the toasted marshmallow on top of the chocolate and sandwich it with the second graham cracker. Squeeze lightly to remove the branch.

Let it cool just enough so you can bite into the S'more sandwich without burning your mouth. They will be asking for S'more, for sure! Enjoy!

A crossword puzzle grid is shown, consisting of white squares for letters and black squares for empty space. The grid is 10 squares wide and 10 squares high. The numbered starting points for the words are as follows:

- 1: Down, starting at (1, 10)
- 2: Down, starting at (10, 10)
- 3: Across, starting at (1, 4)
- 4: Down, starting at (4, 5)
- 5: Across, starting at (2, 3)
- 6: Across, starting at (2, 7)
- 7: Across, starting at (4, 9)

3. where waves lap the sand
5. high place often with snow
6. our planet
7. when the evening begins

1. place of trees and animals
2. a place to grow flowers and vegetables
4. when the morning begins



A Summer of Butterflies

by L.E. Harvey

The summer of 2010 was my first summer in North Country. A born and bred city girl, I now found myself living in a county where the bovine population significantly out-numbered the human population.

I would be inclined to say it was an ordinary summer, and it was, save for one giant gift from Mother Nature: butterflies. Monarch butterflies, to be precise.

I'll never forget watching my partner come in with a plant saying that she had something to show us. On a milk weed leaf was a large black and yellow caterpillar. The kind of caterpillar that turns into a beautiful monarch butterfly. We gathered a jar, placed the milk weed and a moist paper towel in it. Then we let the caterpillar do his caterpillar business. Our four year old watched him day after day in his "changing room." Our entire family was filled with excitement watching and waiting to see this miraculous transformation. Ten days later, a big, beautiful monarch butterfly stretched his wings and was ready to take flight.

Just a day or two after the first butterfly hatched, my mother-in-law acquired yet another caterpillar! Just as we had done with the first, we got this new little guy all settled into his new jar home and we once again found ourselves waiting and watching for butterfly number two. He hatched two weeks later, and our little girl was fortunate enough to watch him flutter away towards the horse pasture into the light blue summer sky.

Butterflies are amazing little creatures, you see. Prior to cocooning, the caterpillar eats as much as it can (they apparently love milk weed). When you notice they stop eating, you know the time is soon. They'll find a spot and begin to dangle themselves upside down. For us, it seemed they like to make their cocoons at night for

we would see an upside-down caterpillar one day and a little green cocoon the next morning. While these incredible insects are in their “changing rooms,” they basically eat themselves to near death. I don’t quite know or understand this phenomenon, but they leave just a few cells remaining to regenerate and to create this entirely new body as a butterfly. The process takes anywhere from ten days to two weeks, and then they break out of the cocoon and are ready to face the world in their new suit.

While butterfly number two was changing, the greatest of my butterfly gifts arrived. We were unloading our air compressor from the truck when I noticed there was another monarch caterpillar. This one was hanging upside-down on the back part of the compressor. From that moment on, I watched diligently over that new butterfly. I didn’t want anything to happen to this precious life hanging on my compressor. This little guy didn’t realize he had picked a very noisy and shaky home. So I always watched over him when the machine was in use. Plus, unbeknownst to him, he was cocooning on our machine during the biggest show of the chainsaw carving season. Poor little bug was trying to change on a machine that was being used frequently. I’d talk to him every time I needed to use the air compressor, and I would check on him after every use. I would breathe a sigh of relief when I saw that he was still hanging tough. I named him John Wayne, because he was such a tough little guy. On his third day in a cocoon, the rain down poured on us. We received over seven inches of rain that day. Thankfully, though, my partner made sure that she placed John Wayne under the safety of her carving tent so that the little guy wouldn’t get washed away.

After that show, we used the air compressor at home, but we finally stopped using it all together because he was due to hatch very soon. I was so excited to see this little one make it. He really had the odds stacked against him, but he seemed to be flourishing despite his choice of home.

On day twelve of John Wayne’s cocooning, my partner and I were on location, working on a large carving. It was an exceptionally hot day that day. We were trying to stay as cool as we could. We were keeping ourselves hydrated and even misting ourselves with water so we wouldn’t over-heat while we were carving. As we were working, one little butterfly flew all around me and wouldn’t leave me alone. Then, amazingly enough, it landed on me. Not just for a moment, but several moments. Several moments turned into several minutes as the butterfly made himself quite comfortable on my arm. So comfortable, in fact, that it began drinking moisture from my arm! It was amazing to watch. While he quenched his thirst, the butterfly and I studied each other. I looked at his pencil-thin legs with little black hairs. His eyes were a deep, dark red and resembled those of a fly. His tongue was a thin, long black apparatus that lightly tickled me. He was freckled with innumerable white spots. His bright orange wings rested closed while he drank. He cocked his head to look at me. I can only imagine what I must have looked like to him! That was a wonderful once in a life-time experience.

Days thirteen and fourteen came and went and John Wayne still hadn’t hatched. I was concerned, but his cocoon was still bright and looked healthy. Perhaps

John was simply a late bloomer. I knew that nature knew what she was doing, so I took comfort in her perfection.

I was away all day on day fifteen, so I was unable to check on the little guy. As much as I had wanted to watch him hatch and take flight, I was sure he already had and I was quite content.

On day sixteen, my partner and I went to check on our air compressor friend. My heart sank as we approached. He didn't look good. The cocoon was thin and the color was starting to turn dark. The more we looked, the more it appeared that John Wayne hadn't made it. When a cocoon turns black, it indicates that the butterfly has died inside. Whether it had gotten too cold one night or what, we weren't sure. What we were sure of was that the little caterpillar, in whom I had put so much faith and hope, was never going to fly.

I cried for the little man. I had such high hopes for him. He seemed so strong and determined to live. If any caterpillar deserved the chance to live as a butterfly, it was John Wayne.

The next day, I moped around and asked my partner if we could bury John Wayne. It seemed silly to bury a butterfly, but this little guy had touched my heart and I wanted to do something special to honor him. I remembered the butterfly that drank from my arm and I resolved myself to that being a great gift from nature to help balance out my loss from John. Nature is balance. Life is cyclical. All of the seasons balance each other. The moon balances the ebb and flow of the ocean. Within nature, we find perfect harmony and perfect balance. So, it only stood to reason that nature would gift me an experience like that in order to balance out the death of John Wayne.

Day eighteen started out like any other. I was still sad over the loss of John Wayne. I was trying to determine the best place to bury the little man. I had just pulled up to my parking space when my partner called me.

"Hey Laur?"

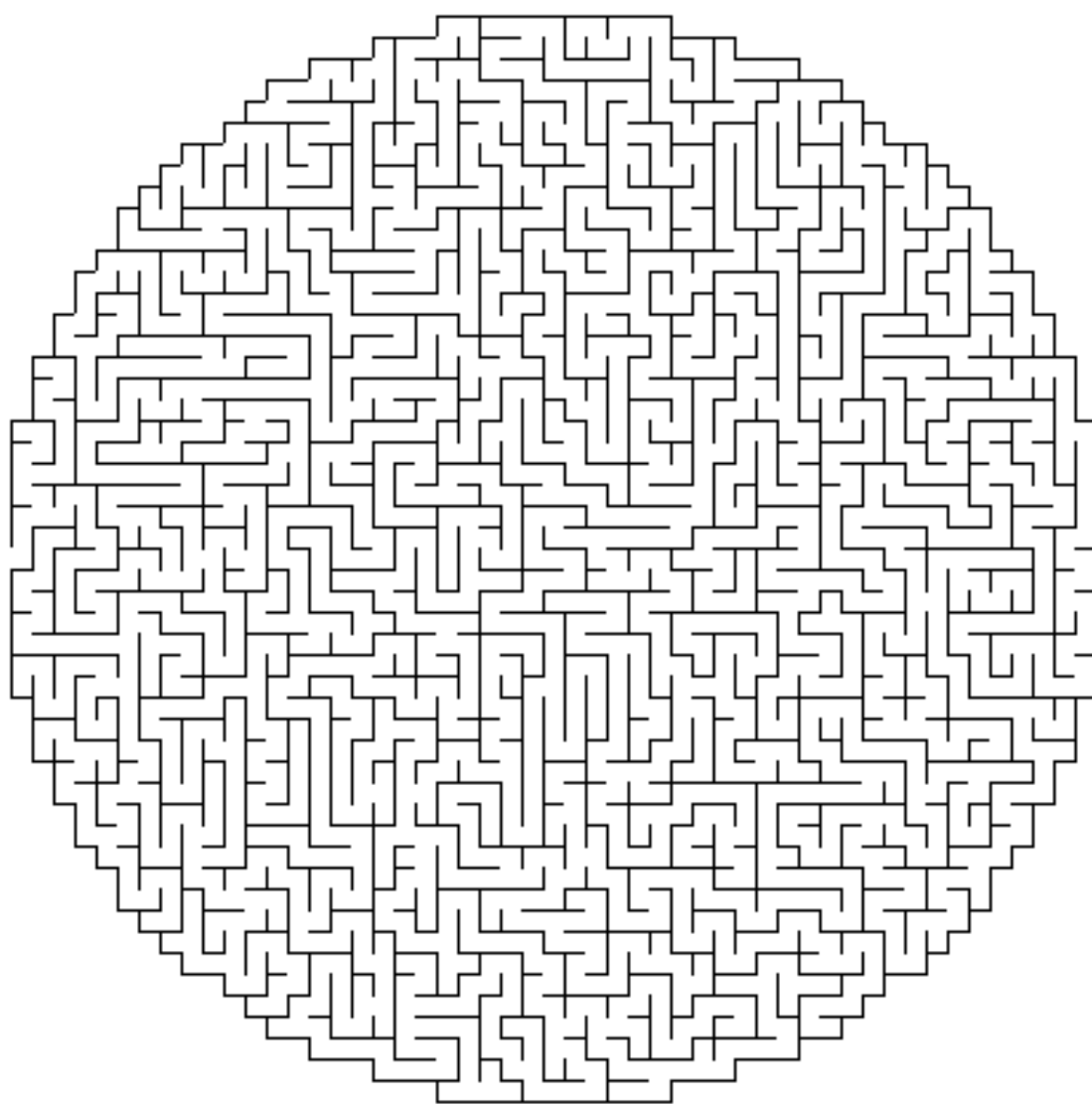
"Hey. What's up?"

"You're not going to believe this. I was going into the barn by the shelves and this monarch butterfly slowly flew in front of me and over my head. Then, I went to check the shelves and John Wayne's cocoon was empty."

I was floored. How could this happen? How could this be? His cocoon was thin and black! John Wayne's re-birth as a butterfly defied the odds and defied all reason. However it was that this miracle came to be, I cried tears of joy and the giant smile on my face could not be erased. Nature gifts us miracles in all sizes, and John Wayne was one of those miracles. I later saw his empty cocoon. I still couldn't believe it even when I saw it, but he did indeed hatch. I'm sorry I wasn't able to witness his first flight, but I know that he flew around my partner to thank her for taking such good care of him. I still miss his company, but am ecstatic over his existence!

John Wayne was my greatest gift from nature. My miraculous monarch.

Around the Earth
by Marilyn Celeste Morris



Attracting Butterflies to Your Yard

By Smoky Trudeau Zeidel



Butterflies are on every Junior Earth Mage's list of favorite insects. They're beautiful to look at, and they don't bite!

A butterfly's beautiful color comes from scales that cover their four wings. Butterflies are members of the group of insects called ***Lepidoptera*** (from the Latin *lepidō*, meaning scale, and *ptera*, meaning wing). Like all insects, butterflies have a head, a thorax, an abdomen, antennae, and six legs. They also have a **proboscis**, a long, curled tube used to drink nectar and other liquids.

Butterflies are nectar eaters. They also like rotting fruit. You can attract butterflies to your yard by making this simple butterfly feeder and keeping them filled.



Make a Simple Butterfly Feeder

By Smoky Trudeau Zeidel

Materials:

1—12-inch plastic flower pot saucer

Two or three brightly colored kitchen sponges. Try to find red, yellow, and purple

1 cup of sugar

4 cups of water

overripe fruit, such as bananas, cantaloupes, and berries

Directions:

To make butterfly nectar, have a grown-up help you measure the sugar and water into a pan. Bring the mixture to a boil, then let it cool.

Meanwhile, cut sponges so they are shaped like simple flowers. Have a grown-up help you, if necessary.

Mash your overripe fruit and mix it up.

Arrange sponge flowers in your flower pot saucer.

When it is cool, gently spoon some of the nectar over each of the flower sponges until they won't hold any more of the liquid. (Store leftover nectar in the refrigerator. It will keep for about a month.)

Spoon dollops of fruit mash in the saucer around the flower sponges.

Place your butterfly feeder in a sunny spot. Be sure to add more nectar to the sponges when they dry out, and replace the fruit mash if it dries out or starts to mold. Wash your feeder dish with soap and water every few days, and replace the sponges every month.



Equinox

(reprinted from *Nature's Gifts Anthology*, VHP 2010)

by Robert Hays

Trees on the south slope, which stretched away from the front of the house, were ice coated from the cold overnight drizzle and glistened in the slanted rays of early morning sun as if decked in strands of diamonds. Essie surveyed the scene through the yellowed lace curtains of a living room window. She was grateful for the sunshine. Two weeks of gray and dreary weather had left her more despondent than usual.

Arthur had promised her brilliant winter days like this. He'd built the house on the north side of the valley after painstaking deliberation, calculating that the rewards of catching the January sun would outweigh the penalty of added heat in July and August. For insurance, he'd planted the fast-growing silver maple trees at carefully plotted locations to afford summer shade and, beyond these, the rugged catalpas in measured straight rows to line both sides of the narrow gravel lane that led up the hill from the main road. All this was a lifetime ago, and the trees were mature now—stately reminders of Arthur's intention that home should be a place of permanence.

The maple trees were among Essie's favorite heralds of spring. One day they would be gray and barren and then, virtually overnight, a delicate auburn fringe of buds commencing to burst into blossom would appear and signal a new awakening. And the catalpas called up memories of warm spring days when the children brought her bouquets—clusters of the trees' delicate white and brown flowers spilling over the edge of their water-glass vase. Before their ornamentation by the freezing drizzle, though, Arthur's trees had stood stark and skeletal, like stick figures on a child's slate, leaving her to worry that auburn fringes and clusters of catalpa flowers still lay in the distant future.

"I'm beginning to think spring will never come," she said softly, as if speaking to

herself. She actually was addressing Plato, the devoted orange tabby cat who was well into his second decade as her constant companion.

Plato rose and stretched, then surrendered the spot of sunlight on the kitchen floor where he'd been sleeping and walked toward her. Halfway there, he stopped and began to bathe. Essie laughed and waved a hand dismissively. "Go back to sleep," she said. "I'm sorry I disturbed you."

The living room window had become Essie's sanctuary. From here she could view the southern Illinois landscape Arthur had so loved, this land between the rivers: a giant wedge of beautiful wooded hill country bordered on the east by the Ohio and on the west by the Mississippi. And from here she could watch the changing of the seasons, the rhythmic cycles of winter dormancy and spring renewal most apparent in Arthur's trees. The seasons afforded markers for life's passing. At times she felt as though nature's changes were the only thing she had to look forward to.

This had not always been so. How many mornings had she stationed herself at this same window and watched anxiously for Arthur's homecoming? And how many times had she felt the immense relief that came with first sight of his tired old Ford pickup, followed inevitably by a sense of guilt as she waited mute and motionless while it turned off the main road and labored up the lane toward the house? Relief because she always knew, deep down, that one day he wouldn't come home, and guilt because Arthur always wanted her not to worry, always promised that he would take care of himself so that she'd never be left to face the world alone, and always insisted that God would see him through any dangers beyond mortal control.

Essie understood that Arthur's vow of well-being was more from concern for her than from honest conviction. Too many times she'd heard him speak with quiet reverence the names of places like Centralia or Herrin or West Frankfort—sites of mine disasters so terrible they were permanently engraved in the lore of this region that God had either blessed or cursed with deep, rich veins of coal.

Arthur was still alive on the dining room wall, in a sober Larry Gelman photograph taken at the end of a night shift one routine day at the mine. Arthur and eight others had just emerged from the mine shaft, stepping out of the cage at the pithead and squinting in the early morning sunlight, their faces smudged with coal dust. They reminded Essie of a troupe of amateur minstrels she'd seen performing in blackface at the little theatre on the town square when she was a girl.

The tragedy struck three weeks after the picture was taken.

Mr. Gelman had humbly presented framed prints to Essie and a half-dozen other new widows as his lasting memorial to the lost miners. She'd heard that the photograph had become famous, published in a national magazine or some such thing, though she never knew if that was true. All this, too, was years in the past, but sometimes the pain still cut like a sharp blade, as if it were new and fresh.

Coal miners' wives learn to live with constant dread as a matter of self-survival. Essie had always known that one of the dark tunnels could become Arthur's tomb. A cave-in, or a spark and explosion, and miners' lives would be snuffed out in the blink of

an eye. She had hardened herself against this possibility as best she could. But she had not prepared herself for the finger-pointing and the uncertainties, and closure might have come more easily had it not been for all the lingering questions.

The worst part was the gossip. Because no one could be sure what actually took place hundreds of feet below the surface of the earth that day when the men died, rumors had floated like dust in the wind during the weeks that followed. Blanche Griglione had viciously proclaimed the disaster Arthur's fault. She blamed him for the loss of her Paulo because Arthur had been the crew leader. Arthur surely must have led the men in the wrong direction after the initial explosion, Blanche said, so they were victims of the afterdamp and helpless to escape the subsequent blasts.

Essie felt guilty because she could not prove Blanche wrong. She wanted to fight back and not allow Arthur's good name to be smeared by Blanche's indictment. Arthur was an experienced miner. His men trusted him. He never would have made that kind of mistake. But she had no evidence with which to answer the gossip Blanche had ignited.

The accusations were even more hurtful because Blanche had been Essie's best friend. From that day forward, neither had spoken to the other.

For her own part, Essie had lain awake night after night wondering what really happened. Only in recent years had she finally resigned herself to living the rest of her life without knowing the truth, beyond the fact that Arthur was gone.

Not that life with Arthur had been perfect. Arthur had his faults. He was human, after all, and on occasion did things for which he was sorry. Yet the shame was hers, because she always assumed that her failings as a wife had somehow brought out her husband's darker side.

And she had not been left to face the world alone. There were the children: Marybeth, their firstborn, who had become the most precious treasure in Arthur's whole universe, and Daniel, man-child from the moment he drew his first breath and bedrock of strength and support for his mother at a time when there was little else to cling to. And the grandchildren. Her home had once been filled by people she loved who loved her back.

Essie—her real name was Esme, but she considered that pretentious—understood as well as anyone that her existence could have been much more difficult. She had been fortunate to have friends and family and she had been able to manage financially thanks to the union's contract with Morgan Coal Company.

But like most positives in her life, these had been severely eroded over the passing years. Arthur's life insurance money was exhausted before the children finished school and, with rising costs, the mining company's once-generous widow's pension had been barely enough to survive on for some time now. Most of her friends and family had scattered and disappeared like dry leaves in the sweeping gales of November. Even the grandchildren were grown and gone, so that Arthur's permanent home had long since quieted from the crying and laughter and incoherent babble of innocent and sweet young voices. No sounds, no smells, no sights or touch of other

humans. Plato was the only other living being in her house for days at a time.

Essie's principal contact with the outside world was Roland Quidry, the letter carrier who drove his Jeep up the lane every day except Sunday and left her mail in a box fixed securely to a cedar post Arthur had set deep in the ground. Daniel had replaced the original mailbox a decade or more ago, and now the new box had rusted and the hinged lid squeaked when it was pulled open, but it was more than adequate for such meager deposits as Essie could expect. She often sat on the shaded porch on summer days and awaited the mailman's coming. If he was on schedule, or at the very least not running late, he'd sometimes stop and visit and express his concern for her welfare. During the cold winter months he would watch for Essie's appearance at a window; then she'd wave and he would wave back, and her connection with the rest of the world would be complete for another day.

As she sat and thought about the ways her life had changed, Plato brushed against Essie's legs and gave her a stout head-butt. This most gentle of creatures wanted and expected her to notice his presence and let him know she cared that he was there, that she received and accepted his love. And feed him, of course, when he was hungry. Essie considered this a small price to pay for his companionship.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mister Magnificent," she said. "Your breakfast is long overdue. You're going to lose patience with me one of these days, and I can't blame you."

Plato continued to rub against her legs as she stood. She might have tripped over him making her way to the cupboard, but she knew his motion and he knew hers. They had shared close space for years and learned to step almost as one as they went about the house. When Essie moved, Plato was nearly certain to move alongside.

"You're always under foot," she complained good naturedly. "One of these days I'm going to step on your tail." Even if he didn't understand her words, Essie believed, the cat recognized her moods. He was made contented by her talk. He rubbed against her legs some more and purred.

She opened a can of his favorite food and spooned half of it into his bowl. She put the rest in a red plastic container which she covered carefully and placed on a top shelf in the refrigerator. After that, with Plato's immediate needs taken care of, she resumed her watch at the window.

Down by the main road, a lone coyote hurried through the frozen grass, watching carefully for any small game that might make a meal. A red-tailed hawk flew circles high above it.

The sun warmed the bare limbs of the trees and the ice began to fall away, first in little nuggets and then in long, shimmering ribbons that shattered into hundreds of pieces when they hit the ground. Some of the remaining seed pods on the catalpa trees dropped with the ice. Across the valley, Essie saw a bright reflection from the metal roof of Albert Johnson's barn as it finally caught a full share of the sun's rays. Come spring, the hills beyond the Johnson place would be blanketed with redbud and dogwood trees that bloomed beneath the canopies of the tall oaks and hickories before they came into leaf and concealed what lay below. She longed for that season, longed

for the fringes to appear on Arthur's maple trees.

Essie sat and watched the interplay of sunlight and shadow until midday. She took little satisfaction in such change as she witnessed, the ice-covered world beyond her living room window no brighter once the sun had melted the ice away. The appeal of the scene before her faded with the morning hours, like a movie she'd seen too many times before. Would the bleakness of February ever run its course?

Plato was hungry again. Essie tended to his needs and fixed a sandwich for herself and made fresh coffee and sat at the small kitchen table with Plato at her feet and tried to remember other long winters. There was that terrible January blizzard. Arthur couldn't get through the blowing and drifting snow and stayed at the mine for four days and nights while she was home with the kids and running out of food for the table. But southern Illinois winters were seldom as severe as that, and she couldn't think of any others that were particularly hard.

"This hasn't been too bad a winter; it just seems so long," Essie said. Plato paid her no heed.

"If you'd been here in that blizzard you might have learned to be less particular about your food. A few table scraps would have looked pretty good."

Plato looked up at her as if he understood and if she was talking about food maybe he ought to listen. He stood and yawned and came over to where she sat and threw a shoulder into her leg and curled his tail around it the way he did when he wanted to demonstrate his comfort with their togetherness. This is what Essie supposed, anyway.

"When Arthur finally got home, he brought in a big sack of potatoes and some canned goods," she went on. "He wasn't sure when he'd be able to get out again. I know, we didn't have you yet. And I'm glad you didn't have to go through that January. But I do wish you'd known Arthur. He was a good man and you would have liked him. Arthur was the only man I ever loved."

Much to her own surprise and to Plato's obvious puzzlement, Essie suddenly began to weep. She stemmed the flow of tears with a napkin and used it to wipe her nose. Plato watched with an air of honest concern.

"I'm all right," Essie assured him. "But you're such a sweetheart to worry about me. It's just that sometimes when I talk about Arthur ..."

Plato still looked to be unsure. Essie leaned down and stroked the back of his head. "You wouldn't believe it to see me now," she said, "but I could have been right popular with the young men if Arthur hadn't come along when he did. I was only eighteen. Maybe I should tell you sometime about Mister Pratt."

In truth, at the time she met Arthur Essie had never had a boyfriend, had rarely been alone with a man who wasn't family. She had been through the emotional turmoil of girlish attraction, though, first with a high school history teacher and later with a man who worked at the post office. She assumed this was love. Her fascination with the history teacher went away during summer vacation. The man at the post office, whose

name was Marion Pratt, posed a bigger challenge.

“Mister Pratt was a good bit older than me and still lived with his mother,” Essie said, choosing to go ahead and share the story with Plato now. “I’d seen him around town for years when I was a little girl and never noticed anything special about him. But one day I stopped to pick up the mail for my papa, and Mister Pratt looked at me in a way no man ever had before. It was in the spring, just after I turned sixteen.”

Essie did not need to stop and think about that day before going on with her story. She remembered it well. All the way home, she had considered the expression on Mr. Pratt’s face. She worried that she had blushed visibly under his gaze, but Marion Pratt had blushed too, and quickly looked away. That night before bed, she’d studied herself in the mirror, hoping to see herself the way Mr. Pratt had, and she was surprised by what she saw. She was developing into a woman. And she was pretty. Still, she might be imagining things about Mr. Pratt that weren’t true. She decided to stop by the post office again tomorrow and see what happened.

“All I knew about men was what Aunt Lornie had told me,” Essie said, carrying on her one-way conversation with the cat. “Aunt Lornie loved to dress up and go dancing, and it seemed like there was always lots of men who wanted to take her. My mother—Aunt Lornie was her younger sister—my mother didn’t approve of the way she behaved, but I thought she was real cool, as the young people used to say.”

Aunt Lornie had been Essie’s favorite among all her blood relatives. She’d often talked to her young niece about men, telling about her own experiences, and her message in general was that men weren’t much good.

“I wanted to talk to her about Mister Pratt,” Essie went on. “At least give her a hint that a man had found me attractive. But Aunt Lornie was away at the time, traveling in Florida, I think. I couldn’t talk to Mama about such a thing, so I was pretty much on my own.”

Essie thought back to her visit to the post office after school the next day. She’d pretended to look at the patriotic posters on the bulletin board and tried to watch Mr. Pratt, busy waiting on customers at the service window, out of a corner of her eye. He was watching her, too, and hard as she tried not to she began to blush. She felt the heat creeping up her neck and into her cheeks and wanted to turn and run, but Mr. Pratt finished with the last person in line and called her to the window. She stepped forward with a quarter in her hand and asked for two stamps. Mr. Pratt carefully separated two stamps from a full sheet and slid them across the counter.

“Here you go,” he said. “And happy equinox. It’s nice to have more sunshine. Spring’s here for sure.”

He took her quarter and made change, counting the last pennies carefully into her hand. His fingertips touched her palm, and Essie had goose bumps on her arm. She felt as if Mr. Pratt could see right through the flesh and bone that covered her brain and read her girlish thoughts. How foolish she must look. Surely he would laugh.

But Mr. Pratt hadn’t laughed at her then, nor at any other time. He kept on

looking at her in that way that made her feel like her blood was rushing through her veins and causing the back of her neck to tingle. Essie never mentioned her attraction to him to Aunt Lornie or anyone else. But for years to come she still had seen Mr. Pratt in a way that was unlike her view of other men.

Essie told Plato, “I stopped by the library on the way home and looked up ‘equinox’ in the dictionary. I’d never heard of it before. I thought Mister Pratt must have been awful smart. I’m embarrassed to say that for a long while I made up reasons to go to the post office almost every day. And Mister Pratt always noticed me.”

It was late afternoon when Essie heard the unmistakable sound of Roland Quidry’s Jeep approaching the house. She went to the window and waved when he stopped at her mailbox, and he waved back, and in a minute he was gone. A heavy cloud cover had obscured the sun, and the day had turned dark and depressing again.

“I think the mail will have to wait,” Essie said. “I doubt there’s anything out there worth risking a fall on the ice for.” She spoke in the general direction of Plato, who lay sprawled on his back in his favorite living room chair, sleeping soundly.

Essie went to the kitchen to check his water dish. She took the dish to the sink and rinsed it clean and refilled it. She filled it too full. Water spilled as she carried it back to its usual spot at the end of the kitchen cabinets and left a wet trail across the floor. Angry with herself, she flung the dish across the room, into the sink, with a loud clatter of breaking china. Plato jumped down from his chair and ran behind a couch.

Essie clasped her hands to the sides of her head.

“What’s wrong with me?” she said plaintively. “I’m sorry, Plato—come on out, you know I won’t hurt you. I’m sorry for being so silly. I’m just not myself today.”

She went to the hall closet and dug into a loose mound of linens. There had been a time when she kept the closet neatly organized, with towels and washcloths precisely arranged by color and size and carefully lined up in tidy stacks separate from the sheets and pillowcases, but she no longer bothered with such effort. She picked the towel with the thickest pile. It had a slight musty odor, but it would be fine for cleaning up the mess she’d made.

Back in the kitchen, Essie got down on hands and knees and began to blot up the water. She made wide circles with the towel in hopes that she was cleaning the floor in the process. She and Plato would be the only ones to know whether the floor was scrubbed or not. She threw the towel, now wet and dirty, into a laundry basket in the bathroom.

Plato gave up his safe hiding place and approached the kitchen warily. Essie scooped him up in her arms and hugged him to her and tried to reassure him.

“I’m sorry, kitty, you know I am,” she said softly. “It’s like I’ve been in a gray mood, like the weather. Forgive me for being an old grouch, okay? I’ll make some supper and we’ll both feel better.”

She opened a can of chicken noodle soup—the concentrated kind that needed water to be added—and let it simmer on the stove for several minutes while she got Plato’s food and set a place for herself at the table. Plato had regained his composure with her stroking and his appetite as well. He was nearly finished eating before Essie had ladled herself a bowl of soup and sat down to begin. She wasn’t hungry. She ate only about half the soup and dumped the rest down the kitchen sink drain.

The house was cold. Arthur had built it strong so that it would last, but it was not well insulated and the old furnace was not efficient. Essie got ready for bed early. She pulled an extra comforter from the closet and laid it across the foot of the bed. Plato would snuggle down beside her and help keep her warm.

As she did every night, Essie said a brief prayer as soon as she was settled under the covers. She believed in God and heaven and took comfort in the notion that Arthur awaited her in eternity. She didn’t pretend to know whether they would be together in physical form, as they had been here on earth, or simply meet again in spirit, and if she asked too many questions of herself her faith was harder to sustain—especially now that she no longer went to church.

She’d once found her church to be a place of comfort, a place where her faith was strengthened and she could enjoy the companionship of friends. These friends included Blanche Griglione. And of course there were the hypocrites—people who said the right things to Essie’s face after the disaster at the mine and pretended to sympathize over the loss of Arthur but later whispered behind her back, spreading Blanche’s nasty rumors. A few weeks after the tragedy she’d vowed never to set foot in the church again.

Arthur had never been a religious man. Even though he professed faith that God would protect him down in the mine, he hadn’t been inside a church since their wedding.

Essie prayed for her grandson Cody, serving time in a Missouri prison for making and selling something illegal. She could not remember what it was. Cody was Daniel’s child and bore a striking resemblance to Arthur. He’d been only eighteen when he was sentenced to two years, and as far as Essie knew the first year had passed without incident.

Cody had always been something of an enigma. Daniel said his son simply marched to the beat of his own drummer, but Rachel, Cody’s mother, was less generous. She’d labeled Cody a problem child from the time he was ten years old and had pretty nearly given up on him by the time he reached his teens.

So far as Essie was concerned, she loved all her grandchildren equally, and she had been careful not to interfere. She and Arthur had raised Daniel and Marybeth to be good parents. Anyway, times had changed, and who knew anymore what to expect of children? “Kids today are different,” Arthur had observed many years past, “and there’s just too many ways they can get in trouble.” Essie had always relied on Arthur’s point of view; she supposed things were even worse today.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Plato’s loud snoring. She shifted her position

so that he moved and the snoring stopped.

“You’re even noisier to sleep with than Arthur was,” she told him, and stroked his back until he was soundly asleep again.

Still worrying about Cody, she wondered how Arthur would have dealt with this troubled grandson. Arthur had been overly stern with Daniel and tolerant to a fault with Marybeth, never willing to admit to his double standard. There were times when this may have been appropriate, as Daniel was always challenging and rebellious while his older sister was a constant model of good conduct. But Essie had seen how their father’s attitude was reflected in the children’s behavior. She’d become protective of Daniel and come to resent sharply what she saw as Arthur’s outright mistreatment of their son. Arthur, she decided, would have been too hard on Cody.

Arthur’s firmness had been his greatest failing, and yet it was his sturdiness Essie missed most of all—the sense that his strong arms would protect her from the terrors of the world. She missed him physically. Purposely overlooking the dreadful nights of abuse, she imagined him lying in bed at her side. The bad nights were infrequent, after all, and not the true measure of this man. It was only when he stopped at the tavern after work, when he had too much to drink and came home angry and demanding, when he wanted things Essie couldn’t offer, it was only then that he was ugly and cruel, only on these long nights that she suffered his impossible physical ultimatums and verbal insults and cowered in the darkness concerned for her safety. She supposed all men were that way and counted her blessings that Arthur’s anger rarely had led him to strike her. Remembering the good Arthur, she finally drifted into restless sleep.

Dreams come quickly. Essie is in a pitch-black tunnel, struggling for breath in the foul air, surrounded by silence. Then Arthur is beside her. He takes her hand. “I’m a good miner,” he says. “I’ll lead you out.” His safety lamp lights the way. There is a crosscut and to one side of it an airshaft and they are in the sunshine and she lies on the fragrant grass and revels in the beauty of the trees and flowers and a vibrant cloudless sky. He comes to her. But it is Mr. Pratt, not Arthur, who makes love to her and comforts her and brings ease to her tense body.

Essie was in a deep slumber when Plato woke her, hungry and impatient. She felt as though she’d been asleep for no more than a couple of hours, but sunlight saturated the room and she knew it was late.

She got out of bed and stepped into warm slippers. She trudged to the kitchen, where she fed the ravenous cat and commenced to brew herself strong coffee. Plato’s appetite was satisfied after a second serving. He curled against her feet as she sat at the table and sipped her coffee, gazing up with an expression of love and appreciation that brought the first crack to the glum mask behind which she’d begun the new day. Essie smiled and Plato purred and made apparent his contentment.

“It’s just you and me, Plato, and another winter day,” she said.

Essie finished her coffee. Plato was alert, waiting for her next move. She put on a coat and told him, “We’d best get yesterday’s mail. Surely the ice is all gone now.”

Plato was at her heels as she carefully stepped off the porch and made her way to the mailbox. The metal box was cold to her touch, but not frozen shut as she'd feared, and she took from it a couple of slender envelopes that obviously were not important and turned back toward the house.

Plato had wandered off to one side. He suddenly stopped and sat, as if on guard.

"Come on," Essie said. "It's still too cold for you to play outside."

Plato didn't move.

Essie started to walk ahead, but Plato struck a familiar attitude that meant he wanted her to come. A few steps closer and she saw why. He proudly stood watch over a tiny yellow flower, barely visible among the frozen blades of grass. He looked first at the flower and then at Essie, as if determined for her see.

She stooped and pinched off the tender stem, separating the bloom from the frozen ground. Plato beamed with pleasure.

"Oh, my," she said, studying the delicate blossom in her palm, "the first crocus. Such a pretty little thing to come right through the cold and ice like that."

The cat stood and stretched, arching his back and digging first his front claws and then the back into the frozen turf. Then he rewarded her with a firm shoulder-block and stood purring at her feet.

"You just weren't going to let me miss it, were you," she said. This was not a question, but a declaration of praise. "I've been so cross, maybe you knew how much I needed a sign of spring."

And surely that's what the hardy little crocuses were—a sign of spring. They were here every year, popping up as if from nowhere, perennial reminders that winter wouldn't last forever. The equinox would come. Balance. Nature's routine, the promise of long days of sunshine to warm the earth. Just like Mr. Pratt had told her. How could she have doubted? It wasn't the seasons that were at fault, but her own impatience. Hadn't she inhabited her little space on earth long enough to know better? Didn't spring always follow winter? And had she not survived the cheerless days of January by looking forward to April?

Essie's outlook brightened. Before we know it, she thought, the maple trees will be showing their red fringe and the weigela and mock orange will be coming into bloom. And we'll be back at work in the garden.

Her senses jumped ahead. It was as if she could feel the soil, warm and moist in her fingers, as she thinned the lily beds to make them more productive. The pink clematis on the backyard trellis had stood the coldest weather well and should bloom in profusion, and in her mind's eye she saw the waves of daisies that would transform the south slope into a sea of white. Nearer the house, the purple coneflowers and black-eyed Susans would brighten their surroundings, and she could almost smell the clumps of watermelon-red monarda and hear the hum of the honeybees drawn to the succulent flowers.

Now she felt almost giddy.

“I’d like more trumpet vine on the fence,” she said aloud, “and this year I think I’ll try a planting of meadowsweet. Yes, I will! Who cares if it’s just you and me, Mister Magnificent? The equinox is right around the corner and we’re going to be all right.”

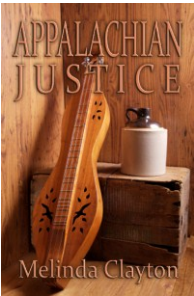
Plato rubbed against her legs, then led her home

Featured Author Titles



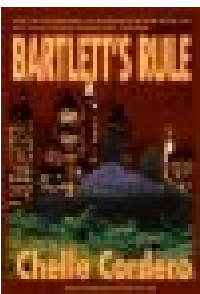
A Chaunce of Riches by [Chelle Cordero](#)

The day that Ben Johnson was hired as a bodyguard for some rich widow and her kid, he never expected to be working for the woman who had abandoned him just when he had needed her the most so many years before. Damn it all, he still wanted her. Samantha Chaunce never thought she would see him again. She never thought she would have to explain why she married the rich man over the man she had sworn she once loved. And she certainly never expected to find out that her rich husband had been murdered and fingers were pointing to her former lover.



Appalachian Justice by [Melinda Clayton](#)

Billy May Platte is a half Irish, half Cherokee Appalachian woman who learned the hard way that 1940s West Virginia was no place to be gay. As Billy May explains, "We was sheltered in them hills. We didn't know much of nothin' about life outside of them mountains. I did not know the word lesbian; to us, gay meant havin' fun and queer meant somethin' strange." In 1945, when Billy May was fourteen years old and orphaned, three local boys witnessed an incident in which Billy May's sexuality was called into question. Determined to teach her a lesson she would never forget, they orchestrated a brutal attack that changed the dynamics of the tiny coal mining village of Cedar Hollow, West Virginia forever.



Bartlett's Rule by [Chelle Cordero](#)

Bartlett's Rule shares the story of Lon and Paige's love affair; a romance filled with hardship, emotion, danger and triumph. Falling in love was never the challenge; being there for each other, knowing just what to say and making it work is the real test. Paige and Lon are real; they are human, they cry and they laugh. Paige has to learn to trust. Lon has to learn to be patient.



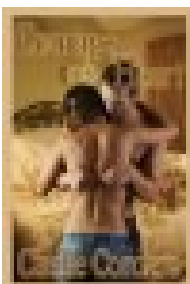
Circles in the Water by [Robert Hays](#)

Whatever else this story may be, it is primarily one of young love of childhood sweethearts in a setting both charming and ugly, and the young man and woman they become. It interweaves their contemporary lives with the chronicle of their early years as part of an inseparable foursome of troubled youth and the tragedies that befall their comrades, DJ and Ray-Gene.



Common Bond, Tangled Hearts by [Chelle Cordero](#)

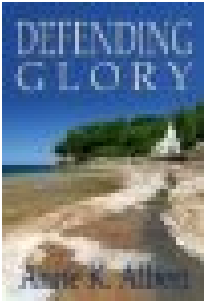
Layne Gillette's world is turned upside down when a man she has never met shows up to lay claim as the father of her 6-year old son. Justin, the victim of a fraternity prank, and Layne, the subject of a forced insemination, have produced a beautiful child that they are both willing to protect at all costs. The two parents realize they can love each other, but when Layne's abusive "ex-husband" shows up, they are torn apart by danger, kidnapping and lies. Justin won't give up until Layne is returned to him. Layne uses her newfound strength, courage and knowledge to defy Charlie's ugliest demands.



Courage of the Heart by [Chelle Cordero](#)

Courage of The Heart shows us that sometimes love is the only cure for the very deepest of emotional wounds. The story of the two lovers takes a series of unexpected and fast paced turns where lives, sanity and love are

put in jeopardy. Their commitment to one another results in a spirit that binds them together and helps them to overcome physical and emotional dangers.



Defending Glory by [Anne K. Albert](#)

Suffering from survivor's guilt and unable to resume his career with the FBI, Mac McKeown moves to northern Minnesota to start over as a general contractor and forget that fateful day that changed everything. When he discovers the body of his nemesis on Glory Palmer's property, along with a warning for her to leave while she still can and abandon her dream of building a Christian retreat, Mac realizes his past has come back to haunt him and an innocent woman's life is in grave danger. He vows to keep her safe during construction of the retreat... but how will he protect his heart?



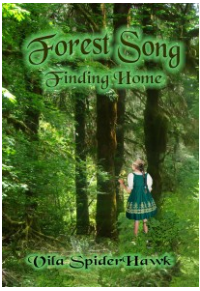
Final Sin by [Chelle Cordero](#)

Deputy Sheriff Commander Jake Carson has his hands full... investigation of a brutal multiple homicide, a troubled son and a vindictive ex-wife. He meets young, free-spirited paramedic Julie Jennings. When Julie becomes the subject of an obsession, it puts both of them in danger...



Forces of Nature by [Marilyn Celeste Morris](#)

"An edgy, well-written suspense by the same author as the wonderful *The Women of Camp Sobingo*, *Forces of Nature* has everything from thriller and horror to romance and human foibles... Each of the characters resonates with the reader with depth and clarity, all while making an entertaining evening's reading..." -Carl Benson, fan



Forest Song: Finding Home by [Vila SpiderHawk](#)

The story of Judy Baumann's struggle to escape to her true home in the woods and to grow into her power there. A cast of magical characters, including a witch, the witch's consort, a family of fairies, an ancient oak, and a bevy of animals each help her in this enterprise.



Forest Song: Letting Go by [Vila SpiderHawk](#)

She left her birth home to learn the ways of the woods in *Forest Song: Finding Home*; She grew into her powers as protector of the denizens of the forest in *Forest Song: Little Mother*, and now, Judy Baumann faces the horrors of World War II: the concentration camps, the Jewish ghettos, and the other persecution of the Jews. Join Judy as she struggles to survive death-defying challenges, betrayal, and loss with courage, cleverness, and humor.



Forest Song: Little Mother by [Vila SpiderHawk](#)

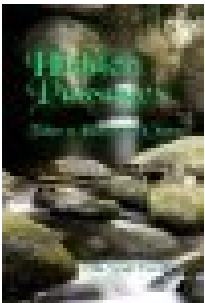
In this volume, Judy reluctantly moves from her teacher's house into a home of her own. She helps the forest denizens hide Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany and in the process finds a new way to relate to her mother, learns to count on and honor her powers, rescues a friend from Dachau, and discovers sexual love. In the end she becomes a mother in an unconventional way.



Frank, Incense, and Muriel by [Anne K. Albert](#)

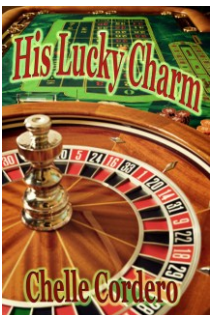
What happens when a gullible intellectual reluctantly joins forces with her sexy high school nemesis, now an even sexier private investigator, to find a missing woman?

It is the week before Christmas... the stress of the holiday season is enough to frazzle anyone's nerves... but Frank and Muriel must deal with... an embezzler, a femme fatale, a kidnapper, and of course, Muriel's eccentric, (but loveable) family. The family whose desire to win the coveted D-DAY (Death Defying Award of the Year) trophy just might make them all crazy...



Hidden Passages: Tales to Honor the Crones by [Vila SpiderHawk](#)

Hidden Passages is a collection of eight finely crafted stories about strong, loving women in the midst of their crone years, celebrating life and sharing their wisdom, courage, and passion with other women, old and young. Vila SpiderHawk's stories celebrate crones in a way that makes the reader feel and remember their own memories of women in their lives.



His Lucky Charm by [Chelle Cordero](#)

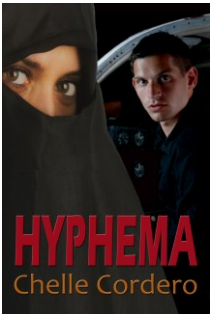
What happens in Vegas doesn't always stay in Vegas... this time it follows Brandon and Caitlyn across the country and into a world of espionage and danger. The one thing that Brandon knows for sure is that he can't afford to lose his lucky charm, Caitlyn.

Will their romance survive a foreign threat to national security, kidnapping, personal tragedy and a murder attempt? (Previously released as *Forgotten*, 2008)



Hostage Heart by [Chelle Cordero](#)

Life was hard after the hurricanes swept through, destroying her parents' home and livelihood... An errand for her boss - a chance encounter with a crew of bank robbers - a kind man who tried to help her ... a man who isn't all he seems...no, he is so much more.

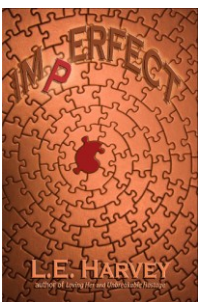


Hyphema by [Chelle Cordero](#)

Hyphema: Bleeding in the eye caused by trauma...

Matt Garratti, a paramedic from New York, moves his wife and son to North Carolina to work at his dream job as a flight medic. Pakistani born Sudah, his wife, receives frosty stares and insensitive comments from their new neighbors.

Before long, Matt wonders if he is pursuing his dream or bringing his family into a nightmare from which they may never wake.



Imperfect by [L.E. Harvey](#)

Carol Mathers: born a sickly child, in a home fraught with undercurrents that threaten to sweep away any chance she might have for a 'normal' life. Now in her mid-thirties, she's a highly sought-after IT guru in St. Louis.

She has built a great life for herself with her partner, Alexandria, even though the two face prejudice as lesbians, and as an interracial couple -fighting tragedy and sometimes, finding triumph.

Carol learns just how much her chaotic past has affected her, and how she can never really escape it, even as she tries to move on with her life. An unexpected event creates even more pain and tragedy in Carol's life, and causes her to wonder about the meaning of and purpose of her own life... or if there is any purpose at all...



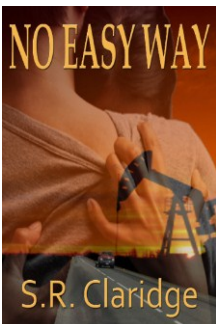
Jock Stewart and the Missing Sea of Fire by [Malcolm R. Campbell](#)

Mainstream humor with a dash of mystery... Jock Stewart is a mix of Don Rickles and Don Quixote, Stewart is the man for the job when the skirts are up and the chips are down...



Loving Her by [L.E. Harvey](#)

Loving Her is a collection of short stories celebrating love and life between women; each story tells a story, and together, they create a depth and understanding of women's love for each other and for life. Loving Her shares the stories of remarkable and ordinary women- women learning to love and women making a difference, all while managing the world around them...as lovers do.



No Easy Way by [S.R. Claridge](#)

Swerving with the kind of deliberate precision only blind rage can empower, the black pick-up crushes Kansas Oil Tycoon, Lou Martin Miller, leaving Miller's widow with an impossible choice: Cover the sin that led to her husband's death and conceal the identity of his killer, or risk the destruction of her family. She carefully weaves a net of protection around her family, but the day she dies it begins to unravel, leaving her grandson, Tom, and his soon-to-be-ex-wife, Kate, in grave danger.

Missing evidence, mistaken identity and manipulation leave private investigator, Stephen Braznovich, trapped between white lies and dark lusts, as he races to piece together a family secret before the next victim falls prey to deep-rooted revenge. The trouble is anyone who gets close to the truth winds up dead.



Now What? by [Charmaine Gordon](#)

It was 2:30 a.m. when the phone rang. I fumbled for it, my heart starting a race toward bad news. Our doctor's voice urged me to hurry. I crammed into clothes as if I expected this call. It is only a fever that won't go down, isn't it? Our doctor shook his head. ...We did everything possible to save him. I held him in my arms when he took his last breath. Carly, I'm so sorry. Settling in beside my Bob, I held his cooling hand and asked the two words spoken many times during our years together. Now what? This time there was no response. I was on my own for the first time. When my fingers touched his wedding ring, I slipped it off and held it in my fist. The gold band was warm. I clung to him. Come back to me, dearest. Sometimes what you wish for is more than you can live with.



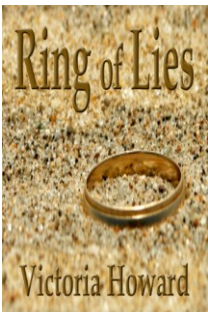
Once A Brat, Always A Brat by [Marilyn Celeste Morris](#)

Brat: Def: (1) An unruly child Def: (2) A child of the military BRAT: British Regiment Attached Traveler. We wear the "Brat" name with pride. Those who argue that the term is demeaning simply don't understand. *Once a Brat, Always a Brat* is not intended to be a serious study of children of the military. It is neither an apology nor a rallying cry for our unique experiences. While some of my fellow Military Brats, missionary kids, children of the diplomatic corps, oil company employees' offspring and others raised outside their home country may find similarities in my narrative, I must emphasize that the first part of this book is based solely on events transpiring between 1938 and 1958, with comments on how the Military Brat experience affected my life. Other Military Brats have contributed to this book, writing about their experiences in their own words. A Resources section is included for those who are seeking information about the various organizations who can offer advice and counsel to our current Military Brats and their families.



Reconstructing Charlie by [Charmaine Gordon](#)

Charlie Costigan has a secret. Home life gone from bad to the worst when she protects her mother from another vicious attack by her drunken father. Midnight. Clothes thrown into an old suitcase, she races for the bus with a letter to an unknown aunt and uncle. “This is my daughter. Embrace her as if she were your own.” Determined, Charlie begins again. Alone with her secret.



Ring of Lies by [Victoria Howard](#)

When accountant Daniel Elliott dies in a car accident, his widow, Grace, is overcome with grief...and panic. Daniel was controlling and their marriage loveless, but he always took care of her. Or so she thought. Grace soon discovers Daniel kept secrets: an alias, mob ties, a list of numbers, a mysterious beach house in Florida....and a girlfriend who looks like Grace. Swallowing her fear, she flies to Miami to claim the house Daniel left her. But the price of her curiosity is peril. Underworld figures stalk her. And handsome, troubled FBI agent Jack West has crossed precarious paths with Grace before. With little to go on and danger at every turn, Grace must depend on Jack to help her navigate the criminal world of south Florida, and find the truth behind the Ring of Lies.



Sabbath's Gift by [Marilyn Celeste Morris](#)

When New York writer, Joanna Elliott, flees her abusive husband to the Texas Hill Country, she and her six-year old son, Jason, unwittingly become a killer's prey. Despite Realtor Tommy Joe Greenleaf's warning that Wanda and Ralph Spencer had mysteriously disappeared from the remote farmhouse ten years earlier, Joanna moves in, and makes the sunroom into her office. Joanna adopts a cat from the local veterinarian, Sam Kelly,

who tells her that Sabbath "had belonged to a witch." Unexplained events unfold: Joanna is locked overnight inside the storage shed, footprints appear under the sun room windows, and Jason's dog, Mournful, is found poisoned.



Sabbath's House by [Marilyn Celeste Morris](#)

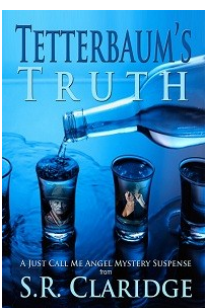
Best selling author Joanna Elliott and her growing family are looking for another house because, quite frankly, finding bodies in the cellar and a psychotic old woman kidnapping her son were not events conducive to bringing her new child into the world. She discovers a charming old Victorian mansion owned only by women of the Emily Harris family, but the remaining heiress has no descendants to inherit. Once the family moves in, however, psychic black cat Sabbath encounters spirits determined to continue the legend, once again putting the family in peril.



Starting Over by [Charmaine Gordon](#)

Each morning, Emily Kendrick runs on the hard-packed sand of St. Augustine Beach. She runs to clear her mind and heal her heart. From the widow's walk of the house perched high on the dunes, a man trains his binoculars on Emily...

One early morning run, he sees tears spill down Emily's tanned face. She stumbles and falls, crumpling into a heap in the sand. . .and doesn't get up. A lone runner reaches Emily's side. Her watcher slams his binoculars onto the railing as he throws his coffee cup against the steel and Plexiglas windscreen...



Tetterbaum's Truth by [S.R. Claridge](#)

Angel Martin plans to marry Tony and live happily ever after... until Tony disappears. Nursing a broken heart, she takes a job at Tetterbaum's Pub, unaware it is the most prestigious Mafia hangout in Chicago.

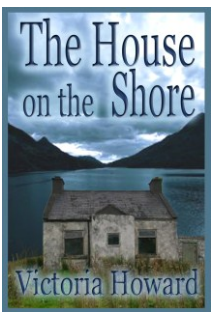
In a world filled with a pretense of innocence and a past filled with iniquity, Angel's life hangs in a twisted balance of deception and revenge. Through an unlikely turn of events, Angel discovers her entire life has been a carefully orchestrated lie. No one is who they say they are and everyone has an agenda of their own.

Finding herself in the middle of a revengeful scheme from a past she's never known and a Mafia blackmail scandal that's already left several dead, Angel races to find answers. The trouble is, the closer she gets to hidden evidence and tainted truths, the more the crime families want her out of the way. With her true identity now exposed, learning who she can trust becomes a matter of life and death and unraveling the past is her only hope for staying alive.



The Baby River Angel by [Robert Hays](#)

When Birdie Wilson and his two boys find a baby floating in a basket on the Ohio River, they can't begin to imagine the impact their discovery is to have on their little town of Cambria. Accepting Birdie's dictum that the child welfare people will name her "Baby Jane Doe" and lose her in their impersonal system, the townspeople, led by Mayor Johnny White, set out to keep the baby a secret from authorities and take care of her until they find out who she is... and where she came from.



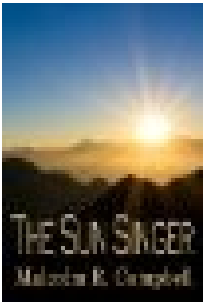
The House on the Shore by [Victoria Howard](#)

This visually magical tale takes the reader on a journey from the remote shores of Loch Hourn in the Scottish Highlands to the singular beauty of Cape Cod. When Anna MacDonald leaves Edinburgh to find peace in the Scottish Highlands, she gets a twofold surprise: a lost sailor teaches her to love again...while a mysterious stranger has plans to kill her.



The Life and Death of Lizzie Morris by [Robert Hays](#)

Life is good for Bradley Morris, except for the nightmares and horrible memories of long-past days in combat. With his beloved wife Lizzie at his side, he travels back to the battlefield in Sicily and finds that facing his demons head-on helps bring peace of mind. But now he faces a far more painful situation: the potential loss of Lizzie, ... in good health one minute and near death the next.



The Sun Singer by [Malcolm R. Campbell](#)

When Robert Adams sees the statue of the Sun Singer in a lonely meadow he hears the song of the sun and receives the gift of prophecy. He excels as the Soothsayer of West Wood Street until a psychic dream graphically foretells the death of his best friend's sister, Julianne. Robert blames himself for the tragedy he cannot prevent and shoves his bright talent into the dark shadows of the future where, he suspects, it will one day save him... *or kill him*.



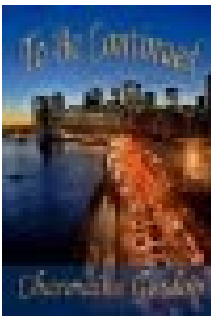
The Women of Camp Sobingo by [Marilyn Celeste Morris](#)

Four women of diverse backgrounds form a bond... Their experiences in a far-flung military compound strengthen three of the women, but a fourth chooses to end her life there. A reunion twenty-five years later reveals long-held dark secrets and sorrows ... *The Women of Camp Sobingo* shares the story of four women; friends who share the life of army wives in a strange land, with husbands who serve.



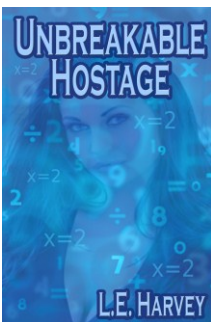
Three Weeks Last Spring by [Victoria Howard](#)

Skye Dunbar needs to get away... to a small cabin in Washington State's San Juan Islands... the last thing she expects is to be accused of computer hacking. Marine biologist Jedediah Walker is called in to investigate dead marine creatures washing up on the beaches. He has another problem – an unexpected, beautiful and suspicious new tenant renting his cabin.



To Be Continued by [Charmaine Gordon](#)

Elizabeth Malone wakes up the morning after an amazing night of passion with her husband of forty years to find a note: "Dear Lizzie, it's not you, it's me." Abandoned by her husband, disappointed in daughter Susie's casual attitude – 'Dad's having a mid-life crisis', Beth decides to re-establish herself as the winner she once was. When Frank Malone returns, he's in for a big surprise!



Unbreakable Hostage by [L.E. Harvey](#)

A gripping suspense novel, it is the story of Lareina Oliveira: a Ph. D. student at UCLA, studying algebra. She has a seemingly ordinary life. Lareina works as a teacher in addition to her Ph. D. studies. She has wonderfully close relationships with her family and her roommate, Sandy. Her life is a rather quiet one, but Lareina is very happy with things as they are. School life seems normal, though one of her classmates, Tony Covelli, is captivated by Lareina and pursues her throughout the semester. Repeatedly, Lareina turns Tony down and focuses more on her private life. Refusing to take no for an answer, Tony eventually kidnaps her and keeps her as his prisoner in a cabin well hidden in the woods.

The only thing keeping her alive is her determination and resourcefulness. Lareina uses her wits and knowledge of algebra to send Sandy and her family text messages in order to help them to find her. Sandy; Lareina's family; her professor from UCLA, and a lonely but dedicated Missing Persons policeman named Marcus Raymer work night and day to try to save Lareina. Will they be able to get to her in time?



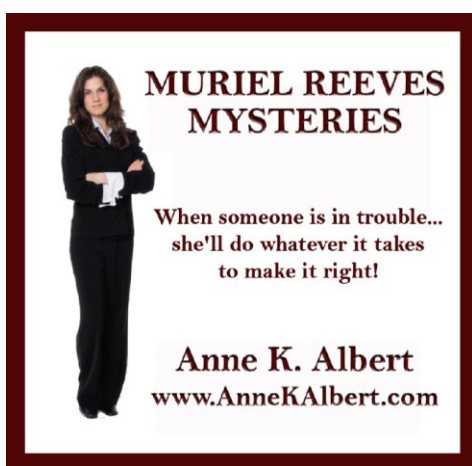
Within the Law by [Chelle Cordero](#)

Tom gave up on ever falling in love again the day that he buried his high school sweetheart and fiancé. He started a career in law enforcement just so that he could find her murderer and rapist. Just when he is about to see justice done, he meets Alli Davis-the defense attorney for the murdering rapist who took his love from him.

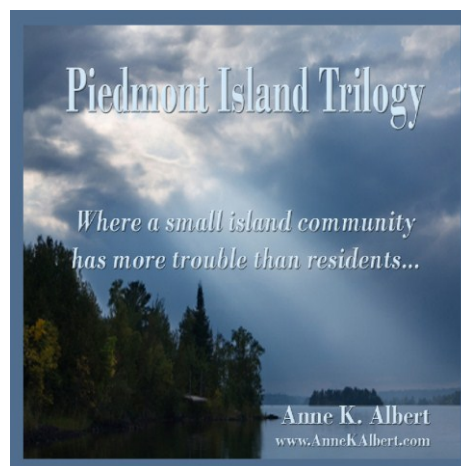
Anne K. Albert



Anne K. Albert has taught high school art, sold display advertising for a weekly newspaper, and worked for a national brand water company, but now writes full time. A member of the Romance Writers of America, she's grateful for the constructive criticism, encouragement, and many friendships she's garnered along the road to publication. When not writing, Anne enjoys traveling with her high school sweetheart husband, visiting friends and family, knitting, crocheting, and of course, reading.



and



<http://www.AnneKAlbert.com>

Charmaine Gordon



Years of experience as an actor on daytime drama. Stage, spokesperson and commercials plus writing sketches for Air Force shows helped prepare me for the wonders of a writing career. Of course, I didn't realize it at the time when immersed in the written words of others, that I was like a sponge, soaking up how to construct a scene, write dialogue, and paint the setting.

I kissed my acting career goodbye, leaving on a high note with the lead in an Off Broadway play, "The Fourth Commandment" author Rich Knipe. It was great fun and time to move on. Movies like "Working Girl", "Road to Wellsville" and having the pleasure of Anthony Hopkins company at lunch, working with Mike Nichols in "Regarding Henry" and singing outside with Harrison Ford, crying with Gene Wilder over loss on another set, When "Harry Met Sally" with the whole gang singing *It Had to Be You*. Lots of fond memories. My first job as stand-in leg model for Geraldine Ferraro in a Diet Pepsi commercial with Secret Service men guarding her and her daughters. A sweet time.



<http://AuthorCharmaineGordon.com>

Chelle Cordero



Photo by Mark Engelman

Chelle has come a long way since first joining the Vanilla Heart Publishing queue of authors nearly three years ago with her first novel, *Bartlett's Rule*. Now with eight novels on the market, she has solidified her standing as a Romantic Suspense author (7 romantic suspense & 1 mystery.) She also has short stories in the VHP anthology *With Arms Wide Open*, Mandimam's Press anthology *Forever Friends*, the VHP anthology *Nature's Gifts*, VHP anthology *Passionate Hearts* and Mandimam Press anthology *Forever Travels*. She is currently working on her next murder mystery.

Bartlett's Rule was named one of Carolyn Howard-Johnson's Top Ten Reads for 2009; *Final Sin* was a 2009 Pushcart Nominee; and *Hostage Heart*, *Final Sin* and *A Chance of Riches* were nominated in the 2009 Preditors' and Readers' poll and had top-ten finishes. Chelle Cordero was recently featured as one of the authors in "50 Great Writers You Should Be Reading" published by The Author's Show in 2010.

Chelle Cordero belongs to the VHP Authors Group and the Arts Alliance of Haverstraw Rockland Author's Series. Along with fellow VHP authors Charmaine Gordon and Janet Lane Walters, Chelle is part of TLC: Three Local Characters With Stories To Tell, an author book discussion and workshop seminar program. She maintains an author's blog at <http://ChelleCordero.blogspot.com/>, a promotional blog at <http://cce613.xanga.com/>, blogs frequently at Lindsay's Romantics <http://bit.ly/3rGJ7l>, and offers a weekly writing workshop for Kindle Blog subscribers at <http://bit.ly/pILcG>.

Chelle lives in the suburbs of Rockland County, NY with her husband, Mark, of 35-years and family. They have two adult offspring. Jenni (& Jason) and Marc (& Trish); they also have three mischievous and spoiled pussycats, one of whom has taken up permanent residence on Chelle's desk. Chelle is a full-time freelance journalist for multiple publications, her articles appear regularly throughout North America, and she writes a monthly column on NYS Emergency Medical Services issues (she is also a volunteer EMT and the current President of her local ambulance corps).

L.E. Harvey



Photo Credit Tara Kneiser/Dixie Pixel Photography <http://www.dixiepixelphoto.com/>

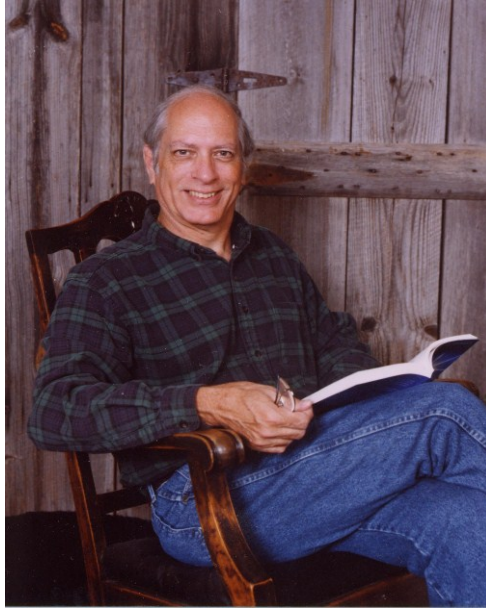
L.E. Harvey is a writer and model in Harleysville, PA. She greatly enjoys all that Philadelphia city life has to offer.

L.E. Harvey is also an activist for human rights, animal rights, women's rights, and gay rights.

When L.E. is not writing or working on the political scene, she models as a pin-up girl and "alt" (alternative) model. L.E. admires women like Betty Page, and "Rosie the Riveter" has been her idol since childhood.

L. E. Says that she wrote these stories out of personal experience, observation, and personal opinion. "It was easy to give these characters life," she says. "They are based on people I know, and they all have elements of myself. From my experience working on cars, my love for animals, my desire to be a police officer, my work as a model and more, each of these women has a little piece of me – they all share my soul."

Malcolm Campbell



Malcolm R. Campbell, author the novels *The Sun Singer* (2004) and the satire *Worst of Jock Stewart* (2006) has been published “Nonprofit World,” “Nostalgia Magazine,” “The Smoking Poet,” the Atlanta “Journal-Constitution”, the Great Lakes “Bulletin,” the “Rosicrucian Digest,” “Future Earth Magazine” and training and manufacturing trade magazines

The Sun Singer was a finalist in the 2004 “ForeWord Magazine” Book of the Year Awards. A contributing writer for “Living Jackson Magazine” in northeast Georgia, Campbell also works as a grant writer for nonprofit organizations.

Since 2005, Campbell has maintained the “Morning Satirical News” weblog (<http://jockstewart.typepad.com/>) where his alter ego, Jock Stewart, takes a “cynical, sarcastic and randomly humorous look at real and/or imagined news.” The early posts from this weblog served as the basis for the satire, *Worst of Jock Stewart*. Junction City, the Star-Gazer newspaper and the primary characters in Jock Stewart and the Missing Sea of Fire were born at the “Morning Satirical News.” While both Campbell and Stewart learned to handset justified columns of metal type out of a California Job Case and copy fit headlines without using layout software, everything else in Jock Stewart and the Missing Sea of Fire is more or less fictional.

Campbell was graduated from Florida State University with a B.A. in radio-television writing, with a minor in English, and from Syracuse University with an M. A. in journalism. He also attended the University of Colorado as a journalism student and a weekend climbing participant at the school’s Mountain Recreation Department. He served in the U. S. Navy as a journalist between 1968 and 1970, writing news stories and features for the military and the civilian press while on board the aircraft carrier U. S. S. Ranger (CVA-61) and while stationed at the Great Lakes Naval Station.

Campbell lives in Jefferson, Georgia with his wife Lesa, of 23 years, a former newspaper reporter, systems analyst, and the consulting director of the Crawford W. Long Museum. In December, Campbell finished serving four years, three as chair, on the Jefferson Historic Preservation Commission. Both Campbells have been active in the town’s Main Street Program.

An avid reader and book reviewer, Campbell especially enjoys the novels of Sunetra Gupta, Italo Calvino, Diana Gabaldon, Susanna Clarke, Cormac McCarthy and Carlos Ruiz Zafon.

<http://www.MalcolmRCampbell.com>

Marilyn Celeste Morris



Marilyn Celeste Morris, multipublished author of *The Women of Camp Sobingo* and *Forces of Nature*, and *My Ashes of Dead Lovers Garage Sale*, has also published *Sabbath's Room*, a supernatural mystery, and *Once a Brat*, part travelogue, part therapy session about her world-wide travels with her army officer father from her birth in 1938 to his (their) retirement in 1958.

She is the co-facilitator of the Fort Worth Lupus Support Group, North Texas Chapter, Lupus Foundation of America and counsels newly diagnosed persons and their families about the ravages of systemic *lupus erythematosus*. She has taped various radio interviews, such as Artist First, local cable television programs, most recently Sizzlin' Seniors on Comcast Television and is accustomed to speaking to groups on the subject of lupus. Being involved in the military brats communities, the Lupus Foundation and her children and grandchildren are her passions.

She has a black cat named Cleopatra, or, rather, Cleopatra has Marilyn! Marilyn says "Cleopatra is highly neurotic, but I love her anyway." When she can find the time in between her work and her writing work, her family and her involvement in her many organizations, Marilyn is a voracious reader, "reading almost anything," she says, and watching the Discovery Channel and History Channel.

[Marilyn Celeste Morris](#)

Melinda Clayton



Melinda Clayton is a licensed psychotherapist and freelance writer living somewhere in the swamps of central Florida. Her vast experience working in the field of mental health gives her a unique perspective on human behaviors, and she likes to explore this dynamic in her writing. It also helps that she's an inherently nosy people-watcher.

Melinda has published over twenty articles and short stories in various print and online magazines, and is currently in the dissertation phase of an Ed.D. in special education administration. Melinda was thrilled to have her short story, *Immortal Love*, chosen for the VHP *Passionate Hearts Anthology*. *Appalachian Justice* is Melinda's first novel.

In her spare time, she enjoys gardening, reading, and being the loudest mom at the soccer field.

<http://AuthorMelindaClayton.xanga.com/>

Robert Hays

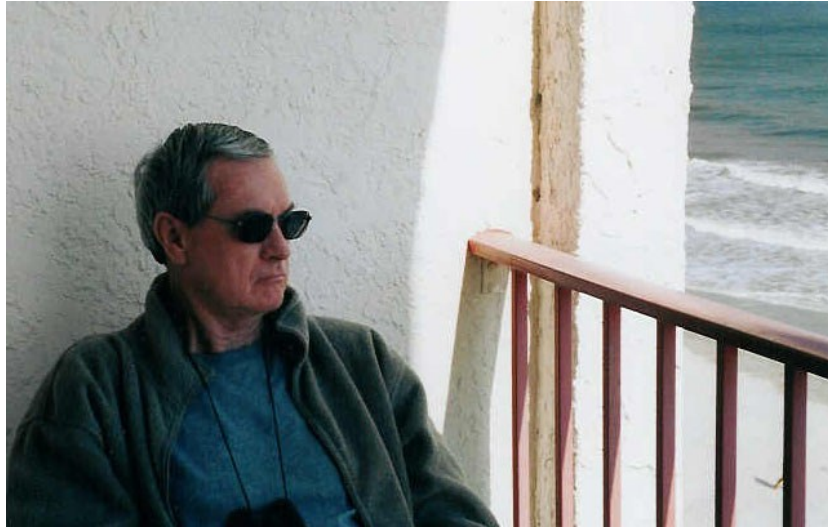


Photo Credit Mary Hays

Robert Hays has been a newspaper reporter, public relations writer, magazine editor, and university professor and administrator. A native of Illinois, he taught in Texas and Missouri and retired in 2008 from a long journalism teaching career at the University of Illinois. He has spent a great deal of time in South Carolina, the home state of his wife, Mary, and is a member of the South Carolina Writers Workshop. His publications include academic journal and popular periodical articles and seven previous books, one released in paperback under a new title. This is his third novel. Two earlier novels, *Circles in the Water* and *The Life and Death of Lizzie Morris*, also were published by Vanilla Heart. Robert and Mary live in Champaign, Illinois. They have two sons and a grandson and share (long story!) a cat named Eddie with the family next door.

<http://RobertHaysWriter.home.comcast.net>

S.R. Claridge



S.R. Claridge lives in Colorado with her husband and two children. She loves thunderstorms, and chilly fall evenings when she can hunker down in front of her computer with a Vodka Martini and write another romantic suspense novel.

She began her writing career with poetry, being published in the 1999 Sparrowgrass publication of *Treasured Poems of America Praise Him*. In 2003 she was published by greeting card company, Melting Pot Gifts and in 2007 she had a short story published in *Glowing Embers* by Aglow International of St. Louis. In 1999 S.R. Claridge expanded into songwriting, having songs published/produced by *Capitol Management* and again in 2007 on a debut CD by artist *Marv Roberts and Midnight Rodeo*. and again in 1999 in Remley Agency & Associates Christian publication,

With a background in theatre, she has enjoyed writing scripts for a variety of venues, as well as performing skits, plays and musical productions. One of her passions is speaking to Christian women's groups on the comedic, yet relevant topic of great sex in marriage.

S.R. Claridge is a romantic at heart, creatively seduced by the allure of a full moon, a glass of red wine and the glow of candlelight. She loves to blast music real loud and dance around like a wild woman until her kids fall over laughing. She believes in true love and that people can change. Rooted in a strong faith, she believes in forgiveness, in Jesus, in miracles and angels and in the power of prayer- professing openly that any good thing in her comes from God.

When asked in an interview why she is a writer, S.R. Claridge responded: *“I write because I can’t NOT write. I love it and I loathe it. It lifts me up and it burdens me. It hollows out my insides and it fulfills me. It is a consuming passion, driven not from a choice but from an endless craving. To ask me not to write would be asking me not to breathe.”*

Just Call Me Angel Mystery Suspense Series



www.AuthorSRClaridge.com

Smoky Trudeau Zeidel



Smoky Trudeau (Zeidel) is the author of two novels, ***Redeeming Grace*** and ***The Cabin***, and two nonfiction books especially for writers: ***Front-Word, Back-Word, Insight Out: Lessons on Writing the Novel Lurking Inside You From Start to Finish***; and ***Left Brained, Write Brained: 366 Writing Prompts and Exercises to Free Your Creative Spirit, Awaken Your Muse, And Challenge Your Skills Every Day of the Year***, all from Vanilla Heart Publishing. She has published short stories and poetry in literary journals such as *CALYX* and online e-zines such as *The Foundling Review*, and was a 2003 Pushcart Prize nominee.

An ardent outdoorswoman with a deep reverence for nature, Smoky's ***Observations of an Earth Mage*** is a collection of prose and poetry celebrating the fragile beauty of our planet. She was the lead editor for Vanilla Heart Publishing's 2010 *Nature's Gifts* anthology, and is gearing up to edit the 2011 edition, to be released on Earth Day 2011. She is currently working on her third novel.

Finally succumbing to her bohemian spirit and need to live near the mountains and the ocean, Smoky moved to Southern California in 2008, where she lives with her husband and daughter in a ramshackle cottage in the woods overlooking the San Gabriel Valley and the San Gabriel Mountains beyond. When she isn't writing, she spends her time hiking in the mountains, camping in the Sierras, splashing in tidepools, and fighting the urge to speak in haiku.

Victoria Howard



Victoria Howard was born in Liverpool, England, at a time when the Beatles (Twist and Shout!) were becoming popular. Her family moved to the Wirral on the “posh” side of the river Mersey when she was eleven. She attended the local girls’ grammar school, going on to college where she graduated with a Medical Secretarial Diploma.

She worked as a medical secretary to an ophthalmic surgeon before going on to work as a legal secretary. In 1980 she moved to Scotland with her husband. She spent the next twenty years living in a croft on the outskirts of a village in the Highlands, and while there, managed a company involved in the offshore oil industry. She feels Scotland is her spiritual home, which is probably the reason why she used it for the setting of her second novel.

In October 2000, Victoria moved to South Yorkshire to be with her new partner, Stephen, and until recently, she worked for Britain’s National Health Service.

An avid reader, Victoria has always enjoyed writing and recounting stories– mainly in the form of letters to friends. She recently completed an Open University course in writing fiction, and has attended a number of writers’ conferences.

Victoria is a member of the Romantic Novelists Association. A frequent traveler to the United States and Europe, Victoria also enjoys walking her border collie, Rosie, gardening, listening to music, and designing knitwear.

[Contact Victoria Howard](#)

Vila SpiderHawk



Vila SpiderHawk lives with her husband in the woods of Pennsylvania in a log house of their design. They share their home with five cats and enjoy frequent visits from their many woodland friends.

<http://www.VilaSpiderHawk.com>