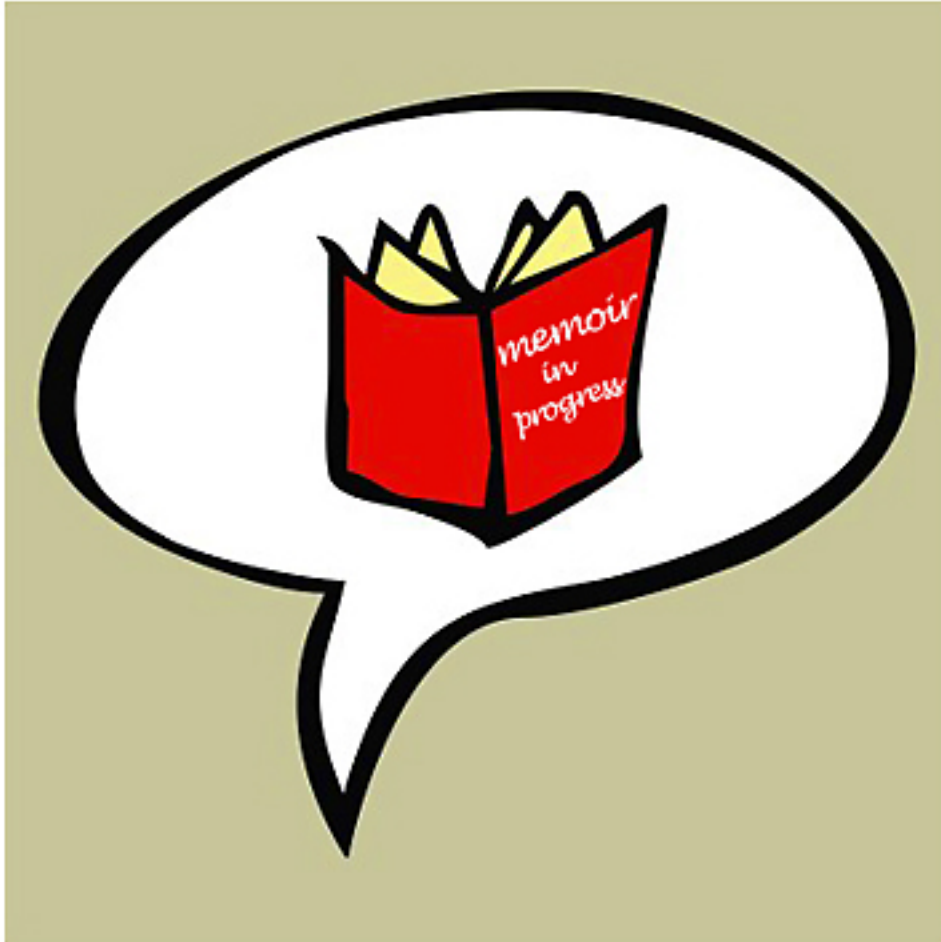


Diving In: Writing Life Stories



Introduction

The following memoirs were written by participants in the class, *Diving In: Writing Life Stories*, which was offered by Commonbond Communities during the fall of 2021. Over the course of eight weeks, participants met weekly to explore writing from the well of memory, including stories about childhood, family, place, work, and more. This class was led by teaching artist Rachel Moritz.

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My Little Brother's Thumb

By Rosemary Bradford

The funny thing about being poor is that we didn't know it. At least we didn't until we entered grade school, and even then, it took a few years. Everyone in our neighborhood seemed the same. Sure, some lived in slightly nicer houses, but we all knew we were under the watchful eye of somebody's mother—no matter where we gathered! Only the evening cover of darkness allowed us any mischievous or secretive activity.

The ice rink my dad made in the winter was an unofficial "community project."

During the years before I started high school, he flooded the "front yard" (that was really at the side of our house) and created the neighborhood skating rink. Over several below-zero days, he carefully sprayed a thin layer of water within the confines of walls of hard packed snow. Undisturbed, layer by layer the ice hardened to a glass-like finish. No bumps, bubbles or dirt patches here! It truly was a work of art, and Dad was very proud of it.

But it was absolutely critical that the surface remain undisturbed until the final layer was applied and hardened. The whole neighborhood knew this for blocks around. Each year, it seems as if we could not possibly wait one day longer until the time we finally got the go-ahead.

That's why that evening the sound of kids in the yard drew me to the front door. I peered out through one of the small glass windows. The wooden door held three in all, staggered vertically close together. In this the bottom layer of the

house, settled deep into its low elevation, it was amazing that any sun reached this door at all. Yet it did, for it was bleached a much lighter color than it had at birth. It was accompanied by a screen door allowing welcome breezes in the summer while keeping out unwanted critters. Now in the cold winter it stood frozen—a dormant, passive companion.

I could make out three dark fingers on our skating rink. Struck by the laughter accompanying the crunching, sloshing sounds of their feet as they stomped repeatedly at the newest layer of ice that had formed, I angrily opened the inside door and flung the screen door open to make sure my words would not be filtered in any way.

“Hey you! Get out of there now, right now, or ELSE!!”

I didn't notice my curious little brother Davey who had worked his way to stand in front of me. Davey was a quiet little kid, nine years younger than me, having turned five years old in that last October of 1952. He stood there silently while I screamed at the interlopers.

They ran, scattering in different directions.

Teeth still gritted tightly, I slammed the screen door shut for emphasis. A horrendous wail rose from my little brother's throat. Oh, no! I had slammed the door shut on his thumb. It was caught in the hinge side of the door. In a split second I flung the screen door open again, releasing the thumb, and carefully cradled the little hand in my own.

"Mom, Mom, come quick!"

I needn't have called; she was already at our side drawn there magically as mothers are by their little boy's painful crying. I stared in horror at the poor little thumb, now split open to the bone. Mom whisked him away to the kitchen where she applied a compress. I struggled to keep from fainting.

Years later I would carefully examine my brother's thumb for the scar it must surely have left only to find a strong, unblemished working man's hand. The scar exists in my mind only. Dave has no memory of the fearful event. It is mine alone.

Broken Bones and Strangers

By Donna Fundingsland

Five kids sitting in a car on a beautiful autumn evening, what could possibly go wrong? But it was a warm evening, and Mom and Dad were finishing their shopping so we were bored. Plus there was a drinking fountain right across the street from where we were parked, and all of us were very thirsty.

So the plan was that my brother Ron would take Darlene across the street first, and when they returned, Larry would take Dale and I across the street to get a drink of water. And so began the caper. All went well until Larry, Dale and I had our turn, and we were ready to return to the car. Since we lived in a very small town and there wasn't much traffic, and what there was went really, really slow, it shouldn't have been a problem. Larry told Dale and I that we would wait until the only car on the street drove past us, and then we could run across the street. I guess I must have been a little bit anxious, or perhaps I was just trying to prove to my older siblings that I could run fast, because I waited until the car got really close, and then I ran right in front of it. And the car hit, and I went down. While my siblings went in search of my parents, the driver of the car picked me up, put me in his car and took me to the hospital.

Memories are tricky—some are accurate and some I'm sure have changed over the telling. My siblings may have seen it differently through their eyes, but I recall is: the driver of the car was 17, he had no driver's license, no insurance, and he had borrowed his uncle's car without permission.

Well, after he hit me, or perhaps I ran into him, he picked me up and took me to the hospital, where it was determined that I had a broken collar bone. I would have to have a cast, and my arm would be in a sling for several weeks. Fortunately, I only had to spend one night in the hospital, and they allowed my mom to spend the night as well. The following day, I was told that if I was a good girl and didn't fuss, they would allow me to visit my grandmother who was in the hospital, and they would put my cast on in her room. Well, at that point, I thought that I was the luckiest girl alive, because none of the other grandchildren were allowed to be in my grandma's room.

The boy and his uncle came to our house to speak with my parents and to see me. After listening to both of them and knowing how sorry they both were, my dad told them that if he promised not to drive again until he had his license, and to never take his uncle's car without permission, my parents would not press charges. So they left with a sigh of relief, and my parents were happy that I hadn't been injured worse. I was happy because both the boy and the uncle had each given me a silver dollar, so I was really rich and very lucky.

Probably 10 years passed, and our family moved from Madison to St. Louis Park, and one day my dad told me to look across the street, so I did, and he said, see that man over there, he is the one that was driving the car that ran you over. Wow, how strange that we had moved 150 miles away, and he moved in across the street. A big coincidence, I would say.

In the 1980s, I had the opportunity to go to a clairvoyant. Her name was Eva Rogers; she lived in Saint Paul on Memory Lane. At one time, she had been a model in New York but had been injured in a tragic car accident that had left her with a damaged leg, so she was unable to continue modeling. However, she had been blessed with another ability, a psychic one. While I was at her house one day having a reading, the room became really cold, and Eva told me that I had

company to see me, and she then described my grandpa and grandma to me. My grandparents had died several years before, but she described them to me in such a way that I knew exactly who they were. Eva told me that my grandfather had a question he wanted to ask me, and I told her that would be okay. So she said she wanted to know if you have had any trouble with your shoulder. I told him no, and that was that, at least for then. But later I remember thinking how strange, that even ghosts have memories.

My great-nephew Blake spent many nights with us when he was small, and he really enjoyed having a bedtime story. Sometimes I would read to him; other times he would ask for a story out of my mind. And when he wanted one out of my mind, he would say, “Tell me that one about when you got in a car with a stranger.” Oh dear, how do you explain to a four year old that strangers are different now than when I was a kid. That he wasn’t a bad stranger.

In 2015, I had a shoulder replacement, and I could finally understand why my grandpa had asked me if I had any trouble with my shoulder so many years before. The arthritis, the bone spurs, the metal in my shoulders that sometimes prevents me from moving my arms properly all bring back the memories of a warm autumn night with all five of us sitting in the car.

A Close Call

By Charlotte Hackett

I think I was about six or seven years old when we were on vacation on our way to the Ozarks and were staying in Hot Springs, Arkansas. We always looked for a ‘modern’ cabin. Back then it was a little hard to find motels or cabins with indoor plumbing. Whenever we stopped at any motel or cabin, I always told my dad to “ask them if it is modern.”

That night we stayed at a very nice ‘modern’ cabin. In the morning, we were going to go out somewhere and Daddy, Mom and I got in the car all ready to go. My dad put the car in neutral and started it up. Then he said, “Oh, oh, I left something in the cabin. I’ll be right back.” He turned off the car and went back to the cabin.

While he was gone, the car started to roll backward toward the cliff behind us. Mom was in the front seat and could have easily just moved over and stepped on the brakes. Unfortunately, she knew nothing about cars or driving, so instead of stepping on the bakes, she jumped out of the car and tried to hold it back by herself. It wasn’t much of a contest between her and the car, and it just kept rolling backward toward the cliff.

I was so young I didn’t really understand what was happening. I only knew that I felt frightened, and my parents were panicking.

That day someone was certainly watching out for me because the car got stuck between the corner of the cabin and a tree right on the edge of the cliff.

Needless to say my mom got a much-needed lesson about brakes, after they knew I was safe.

I don't think I realized for a year or two what a dangerous position I had been in. I'm not sure what would have happened if the car hadn't gotten stuck, but I'm sure it wouldn't have been good.

The Roman Road

By Dianne Langevin

I remember walking in solitude in the pouring rain wearing full Peregrina aka Pilgrim regalia: backpack hoisted high on my shoulders, red weathered rain cape enveloping my person and belongings, leather boots drawn taut at the ankles and my walking stick firmly grasped in hand.

I was walking what has been known historically as The Camino, The Way, The Walk. For centuries people have sojourned from all corners of Europe and beyond, citing as many personal reasons to do it as there are people who walk, I suspect. Nevertheless, it is a common practice and a widely-respected thing to do in Spain. I actually likened it to a “mini-life” experience of meeting people from all over the world and becoming fast friends by cutting the “crap” in conversation, so to speak, and focusing decidedly on discussions of what was important in the moment. Then, naturally we parted ways for various reasons, only to possibly meet up with them again at a later time and place. Those were glorious reuniting moments full of fun, joy and most closely resembling the spirit of family and friends. To me, this became the magic of The Camino.

On this day, however, the old Roman road disappeared into both directions relentlessly revealing the endless path. How long had I been walking? Did I choose the correct direction at the last juncture? Was that rock accidentally moved? The one with the painted yellow arrow indicating the preferred direction to take?

The hectares of drooping and spent sunflowers remain plainly etched in my memory. In that very moment, coincidentally, I felt a strong and distinct affinity

with them; a kind of kinship with these sullen and towering monoliths that seemed to stretch out as far as the eye could see. At this point, I was deeply saddened and worried and began chanting a simple prayer asking them to help guide me in my quest. As this walking meditation continued, the chants morphed into Hail Marys and Our Fathers spoken aloud to the beat of my high-top Spanish boots. Time seemed nonexistent and irrelevant.

Suddenly, becoming jarred awake from my self-imposed stupor, I found myself perched precariously at the edge of a precipice. A sleepy village nestled in the magical mist of the valley below; smoke stacks emitting primordial signals beckoning me forward. With an overwhelming feeling of elation, gratitude and joy, I resumed my cadence with a much quicker and more purposeful pace as I maneuvered the sharp, tricky and slippery slope.

While it took some time to reach the village below, I found myself entertaining thoughts of warmth, food, and dry clothes dancing in my head. Although on a darker note, a seemingly more sinister line of thinking reminded me of the ample fair warnings given to those of us venturing on this walk. You may experience the possibility of encountering rabid and stray dogs at any given time along the path. However, I don't recall anyone telling us what to actually do about it, if we did run across such an unfortunate situation.

Walking finally through the center of town, I found no one. Not one person milling about or hustling in the rain from one building to another. No cars, no bikes, no people. Only three scruffy and underfed dogs who were obviously interested in keeping a careful eye on me—almost as intently as I did them. “Doesn’t anyone live here?” I heard my voice echo loudly ricocheting off of nearby concrete walls. My frustration and fear was palpable by this time.

The sun would be setting in two hours’ time, and I needed to make a decision. Standing at the far end of town, acknowledging to myself that even if I

left now, according to my map, I would be late in reaching the next hostel. Darkness would be upon me before reaching this destination, which is never a good option. Regardless, I sat down on the curb to take off my soaked boots, giving myself a moment of much needed relief.

Several deep breaths, boots back on, and a determination to forge ahead anyway, I stood up, stretched and looked back into the direction from which I came. It is true, “perspective is everything!” The word “RESTAURANTE” was colorfully emblazoned on the massive wall of a nearby building! An immediate and visceral chill ran up my spine confirming my incredibly good fortune.

My chants, prayers and flailing tenacity had paid off, although I have no illusions that placing continually one foot in front of the other helped, too. Instantly, as I pushed the heavy iron and wood-laden Spanish door open, I was propelled into a welcoming state of incredible happiness and relief. Sitting at the bar were several familiar Camino friends who, upon seeing my haggard entrance, expressed warm and wholehearted greetings to me. Moments later, I was reiterating my day with them and enjoying a hot bowl of aromatic Sopa de Ajo. I was home for another day.

Preschool: 1959

Thunderstorms Ahead

By Jackie Shaefer

I hurried down the lilac path, heavy droplets of water sliding onto me from the glistening leaves. Mom had dressed me in my yellow slicker and rain boots. She dropped me off for nursery school and told me not to play in the puddles since I was already late. At 9 a.m., it was almost as dark as night, except for when I saw Aunt Lorraine's tiny brown house lit up by lightning. I was relieved to make it onto her soggy porch and through her creaking door before the thunder. I had just put away my slicker and rain boots when I heard Aunt Lorraine get us started on our first activity.

* * *

Preschool, or nursery school as we called it then, was a fun time for me, a time without cares. We called our teacher Aunt Lorraine, though I'm not sure if she really was someone's aunt at all. But she came highly recommended—through the town dentist. Aunt Lorraine was beloved by all of us, and she gave us a good smattering of activities cherished by children our age. We played dress-up, read stories, tried whistling, tied our shoes, had indoor parades, sang songs, and recited nursery rhymes. Aunt Lorraine also had a favorite story she often told us, which she eventually wrote up in a book, where a young fish learned lessons about good behavior. It was loaded with guilt-inducing lines, not at all troubling to us since it

was characteristic of many stories of the day. Most of us were quite responsive to guilt and had already encountered it at home in our many adventures, so we took it all in stride and related well to the naughty little fish.

* * *

“Today we’re having a parade!” announced Aunt Lorraine. “Line up here, all you train engineers! We’re going to sing ‘‘*I’ve Been Working on the Railroad*.’’” Aunt Lorraine had a red kerchief around her neck, and she was wearing blue jeans. She DID have legs! I had never seen her in anything but her long skirts, even though most of the ladies wore knee-length pencil skirts with kick pleats. She handed out denim engineer caps and tied kerchiefs around our necks.

“First we’re going to explore my kitchen cupboards. When I tell you, you’ll go to the kitchen in pairs—groups of two. Each person can take two lids, like this.” She held them up. She led in half the group by pairs. The other group was told to choose a big cooking spoon and pan to turn upside down and use as a drum.

We returned to our line, and next Aunt Lorraine taught us how to play cymbals and drums. It was fun to make so much noise. We didn’t usually get to do that at home.

“Now I’ll show you something that’s *really* fun. You can PLAY your cymbals and drums at the same time as you are MARCHING in our parade. Let’s practice playing AND marching. For now, we’ll march in place like this.” She lifted high her stick-thin legs. We banged and stepped—once in a while at the same time. By now, the windows were fogging up. Usually they were open a crack, but not today.

“Now comes the tricky part—we’ll play, and march, and SING all at the same time! How many things will we be doing?” Children shouted out 2, 3, 5, and

more answers. “Yes, we’ll be doing THREE things all at once! AND—we’ll march through the rooms of the house!”

Suddenly the dark house was drenched in light. “OK . . . now! HURRY! All three things!” Aunt Lorraine led the way. “Someone’s in the kitchen with Dinah, someone’s in the kitchen I know-o-o-o. . . .” Off we went, through the kitchen, weaving in and out of the rooms of her house like a giant needle and thread. We were playing—and marching—and singing, making so much noise that no one heard the loud clap of thunder. Looking back, I wonder if that was Aunt Lorraine’s antidote for scary thunderstorms.

* * *

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, US military advisors were stationed outside of Saigon. The US had offered “advisors” to help keep South Vietnam free. Of course, I was too young to know that what awaited them would be their own thunderstorms—blinding and deafening firefights against the Viet Cong. How did they chase *their* fears away? Who would be there to distract *them*? We had Aunt Lorraine and safe shelter. But without a warm and nurturing soul like Aunt Lorraine, many of them learned to simply numb themselves to the blinding and deafening horrors they saw and heard. The fortunate ones were able to open their eyes and ears again when the danger ended. But sadly, many of our brave veterans remained in their numbed states long after the war ended.

Our nation lost its first soldiers in Vietnam the very year I began nursery school. My education was off and running, and so was this awful war that plagued our nation throughout every one of my school years. Could our nation ever hope to graduate, as I would? Would the war ever be finished? Could we ever move on? We got caught up in an immensely prolonged war, one that wasn’t directly for our

own benefit, one that wasn't fought by an all-volunteer force, one that wasn't fought in our homeland. We didn't really expect the harm to reach our shores; we were just supporting a little country—somewhere overseas—that was threatened by Communism. Externally, the harm didn't touch our shores; but internally, as a nation, we soon became deeply wounded and were drowning in both events and reactions.