

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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SCHOOL DAYS

by Jack Williams

I, highly allergic, should not write about cats. Blushed face, sniffles, and loud sneezing with any whiff of cat (except Siamese) could be expected to fog my view. But two cat stories deserve to be told.

Picture three cats sitting in row on the edge of a manger, adjacent to a milking stall in the late 1930s, in the last days before milking machines. See the farmer's son, early teenager, at sun-up, begin the daily chore before school of milking the family's cows. See him on his stool, pail captured between his legs, under the Holstein that led the small herd to the barn as milking time approached. Squirt, squirt, squirt, squirt in experienced sequence rings from the pail, but every now and then, a missed beat.

Look closely to see what is up. Every now and then, the boy twists one of the cow's teats as he makes the downward

squeeze, and with unflinching accuracy, sends a spurt of milk in free air, not just in the direction of the cats, but at the target cat he chooses. Now see the lucky feline, appropriately positioning its head and open mouth, take in the flying lactic fluid, without a drop lost.

Boy and cat deserve blue ribbons for that and the many squirts that follow. When milking is over, cows, cats, and boy, well-satisfied, pursue their routines. Cows with their grazing, salt licking, and lapping water. Cats guarding the granary, taking care of the mice. The boy washing up, breakfasting, and trudging to school in the rising sun, knowing in the evening at milking time he will be at it again, expectant cows and cats arrayed.

For the second story, regard lions as cats too.

The picture now is on safari, at day break, riding in a Land Rover, the guide with a rifle driving, his sons perched on each front fender, spotting. We stop. There is enough light to see a mature

male and female lion pair, somewhat apart, down in the grass, passive, to the side of the earthen road. Under their gaze, down the road, we see two kits, grown just enough to be on their own, moving together, following a porcupine. Every now and then, a kit gives the spiky animal a nose nudge and comes away abruptly, surprised, maybe letting out a cry. The parents stay quiet, make no move to protect their young. This is a school day in the lion world. The little lions are busy at lessons.



THE CRUMBER

by Kathy Hoff

My mother had a crumber handed down by someone in her family—or maybe it was one of her many wedding gifts just back from storage after the war. It was brass with a fancy rococo design embossed on the tray. I didn't remember seeing it before the war and had to have its name and function explained to me.



It reappeared because Mother was planning a fancy dinner party to say thank you to friends who had been good to us before Dad went away to the Navy.

Understand, we were a family who ate in the kitchen—breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We had a small, round maple table with four wooden chairs for the four of us. We didn't own a dining room table and chairs until after Gamma died, and her mahogany table and chairs were shipped to us from Oregon. I don't remember what we used the dining room for in the flat where we lived for the first three years after we came back to Hartford. Before the war when my brother and I were little, the dining room in our house was our playroom. For special dinners, like Thanksgiving, Dad would carry the little maple table from the breakfast nook into the playroom, converting it into a dining room. The only use I remember for the dining room in the flat, now that my brother and I were eight and ten, was when an out-of-town friend of my parents used it as his bedroom for a short time while he took a course at one of the insurance companies in Hartford. He had a cot in there. He must have eaten with us, too, but I don't remember about that. I really don't remember anyone having dinner with us outside of visiting family until Mother's famous thank-you dinner not long after we came back.

In 1943, when Dad was about to leave for the Navy, their couple friends up on Forster Heights were good to us. The Ingallses and Beggs took in some of our furniture to save on storage. The Coburns threw a big farewell party with a buffet dinner the day before our furniture went into storage. I do remember that dinner, because we had ham and Parker House rolls, which I would then have said were my favorite foods in the whole world, but I got violently sick to my stomach and wouldn't eat ham for years after that. The day after the farewell party, I threw up regularly and got moved around the house from bed to sofa to chair as our furniture disappeared into a van.

So, it was a big deal for our family to be back together in Hartford, with a place to live at a time of post-war housing shortage, our furniture back out of storage, and Dad home safely and teaching again. All that is what Mother wanted to celebrate. So she planned a dinner for the Ingalls, Coburns, Fishes, and Beggs—all those old friends who had been good to us. She planned a menu around chicken casserole and Italian bread and bought two big Pyrex casseroles, which we had around for years afterwards. She also planned a sit-down meal at which she could show off her newly unpacked silverware, candlesticks, fancy linens, and other special wedding gifts. I don't know where she found tables and chairs. Maybe she bor-

rowed card tables and set them up in a line and rented folding chairs. Anyway, somehow she managed to set places at a long table.

Now for the crumber. Amid all the candlelit elegance she imagined, the ultimate elegance was to be my brother's and my performing as servers. I was to bus between main course and dessert, taking used dinner and bread plates to the kitchen and rinsing them for later washing. My brother, Ricky, was to crumb the table with the fancy brass crumber. We had coaching sessions to assure smooth performance at the big event. I practiced carrying our family dinner plates the couple of feet to the kitchen sink and rinsing them. Ricky gave the kitchen tablecloth a few half-hearted scrapes, even though we hadn't left many crumbs for him to practice with.

The evening of the party, we all dressed up. Before the guests arrived, Ricky and I had our own supper in the kitchen and admired the elegantly set table in the dining room. We lurked in the kitchen, probably squabbling, per usual, as company came. Mother bustled back and forth between kitchen and dining room serving, looking flushed and happy. The grown-ups ate and chattered. Finally Mother reappeared, carrying the first two empty plates. "It's time," she hissed at me, and I sprang into action, helping her carry out plates. When we had all

the plates cleared, she thrust the crumber at Ricky. "Now." She held the swinging door between kitchen and dining room open for him. He shuffled through the door reluctantly, holding his brass tools in either hand, sidled up to the table, as Mother and I observed. He took one scrape at crumbs of Italian bread on the tablecloth. Then one of the ladies remarked, "Aww, how cute!" Ricky flung both crumber parts down right on top of the crusty crumbs and fled.

"AIR CONDITIONED"

by Phyllis Purscell

. . . the sign outside
the movie theater bragged,
each letter of the blue words
frosted with white.

Imagine leaving Betty Grable's cool
Technicolor world for the assault
of an Iowa sun, the sidewalk
hot enough to do the egg trick.

Those were days that faded, but
did not cool, when the heat rose
from your mattress to meet you halfway,
and you couldn't believe you had a
winter coat.

No one drank milk for supper
because it was warm by the time
you set the table, and even your jolly
Oklahoma-born mother complained.

WHITE ROCK LAKE

by Howard Arons

White Rock Lake in Dallas will never make the list of America's most scenic lakes. At a little over 1.6 square miles, it's a drop in the bucket (pardon the pun) compared to the 60 square miles of Lake Winnepesaukee, New Hampshire. Now *that* lake certainly meets all my criteria for "scenic." But Winnepesaukee is a "destination" lake, whereas White Rock is "my" lake, just five miles northeast of the city. From my childhood and beyond, I have a lot of pleasant memories tied to White Rock.

Several times a year during the wilting heat of Texas summer, our family would have a picnic on the shores of White Rock Lake. Mother began assembling the feast first thing in the morning: freshly-made potato salad, slaw, deviled eggs, deli meats, fried chicken, sweet tea, and half a watermelon. A big tub and a 50-pound block of ice—reduced to chunks by my father with a vicious-looking ice pick—provided the necessary refrigeration.

We packed the car with the food, a portable radio, some casual fishing gear, and maybe a ball and gloves. The drive to White Rock took only fifteen or twenty minutes, but after we turned onto Lawther Drive, the road that circled the lake, the challenging part of our journey began. We needed to find the perfect

location. We wanted a tidy spot with a mixture of sunny and tree-shaded areas, and with no crowded, noisy gatherings nearby. A spot would be eliminated at once by the presence of leftover watermelon rinds and seeds scattered around the table.

Even though it was early, there were other people already parked by the edge of the lake. Our standard family picnic dialog would begin, as the car rolled along slowly:

MOTHER: What about that spot up ahead . . . it looks nice.

FATHER: We just started looking. We shouldn't settle for the first spot we come to.

Slow driving continues. Time passes.

FATHER: That was a good spot, but it looks like those people have already stopped there.

MOTHER (pointing): There's a good place. Right there!

Father quickly swings the car off the road and into the shade of a big tree. We've found our spot. As we get out of the car, I can smell *picnic* in the air. It's a mixture of wood smoke, pine needles, warm earth, and notes of lake water. We unpack the car and find a cool, shady place for the food. Now it's time to relax and enjoy the food, the lake, and the outdoors. Maybe we'd play ball, or fish, or just be lazy. We preferred not to have a classic picnic dinner, with the family gathered around a table. Instead, we each

chose to "graze" throughout the day, buffet-style, on whatever dish appealed at the moment.

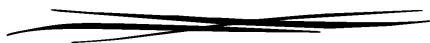
Swimming in White Rock was restricted to one section of man-made beach, with outer limits set by a barrier of buoys and netting. At least once during the summer, our family got together with my mother's four sisters and assorted uncles and cousins for a swimming party at that beach. The young people were all late pre-teens. The boys seemed to enjoy themselves, but the female cousins were always sullen, concerned mostly about their hair and possible sunburn.

In high school, I discovered that White Rock Lake had other attractions. Those inviting, shady picnic spots at the lake shore became dim lovers' lanes when the sun set. The lake was such a popular place for couples that you'd eventually be spotted by someone who knew you or your date. Gossip and teasing would be sure to follow for at least a week. We boys acted angry about it, but we were secretly pleased. I won't pretend to know how the girls felt.

I still recall one particular picnic from my early childhood. The whole family had decided to do a little fishing. I soon grew bored watching my cork bob up and down, so like any little kid I wandered off. Some time later my father shouted to me, "Hey, you've got a fish." I ran back to my bamboo pole at the

water's edge, and immediately saw that the cork had gone under. I pulled up the line with great anticipation, and there was a small sunfish, colors flashing wetly, flopping around on the hook! I will never forget that moment.

Years later, when I was in graduate school, I was home for Christmas. My father and I got into a serious talk, recalling past events in my life. I fondly remembered catching that fish at White Rock. He told me that *he* had caught it but had put it on my hook so we could be together when I got the thrill of catching my first fish.



NOT FOR SALE

by John Wood

There are those things
That barter or a bitcoin
Do not buy:
A sunrise or a sunset's grace,
An evening or a shooting star.
A flower bell, a sprig of Queen Anne's
lace;
A rainbow as the rain beds down;
An owl in his private space;
A lover's kiss, a warm embrace.
Yes, there are those things
Not offered in the market place.

TUNA CANS

by Doug Meaker

My daughter, who works in a retail nursery, reminded me of something I had taught her years ago. Tuna cans (or pet food cans) are about the only rain gauge a gardener needs. The cans are about one inch deep; that's all the rain or watering most plants can use. So when watering, quit when the can is full, and don't water again until the can is empty, and then quit when the can is full. If you want to water in between, again quit when the can is full. It's true that you can't do much about a two-inch rain; just don't add to it. I used to use these cans when I had a plot in the Community Garden, and now I have one near my potted plants on my balcony.



OUR YEAR IN NEW ZEALAND

by Alice Warshaw

In 1938, our dad started a one-year exchange of jobs, homes, cars, and pay with a New Zealand college professor of geography.

Mom made friends and adapted to housekeeping with unfamiliar equipment, while my nine-year-old sister got great schooling and skipped a grade when we returned to the US.

That year-long adventure provides a timeline for me. I can be certain that, if an event took place in New Zealand, I was two or three. Even though I was so young, I remember these vivid experiences.

* Watching a spectacular kitchen fire erupt. Mom screaming for my dad. “FIRE! FIRE!” She had been deep frying something. Dad smothered it with a towel. I had no idea you could do that.

* Falling asleep some nights to the sound of bagpipes braying. It came from a house up the hill. Mom said she hated the “music” that would start up every Saturday night and go on into the wee hours. I liked the sound of it. And do to this day. Mom was told by a neighbor that his nibs would take a nip or two to get the music flowing. No wonder my teetotaling mother hated it. She would sigh and say, “He’s in his cups, again.” I envisioned a little man sitting in a cup. Confusing.

* Walking barefoot on a black sandy beach, too hot for my tender feet.

* Playing alone in our paved front garden, standing on a little bench to see over the garden wall, waiting for the mailman, and saying, “Ta-ta,” as he arrived. I would collect the mail, waving and tata-ing as he walked on to the next house. My special job, you see, was collecting the mail and bringing it in to

Mom *right away*. “Don’t put it down. It might blow away.”

* Enjoying our downward sloping backyard. We would go there to pick grapefruit. They were huge and hard to pick, but with just a little help from the big people, I managed. It took two hands—well, three actually. Usually someone would lift me up, but sometimes they would bend down a branch, so I could reach up and try to pick the fruit, “All by myself.”

* Making endless visits to the living room sofa to enjoy the view. The sofa backed up to the rear windows. Standing on the sofa, I could see the crescent of Auckland Bay with boats and on the far side, the little extinct volcano called Rangitoto.

Rangitoto. Such fun to say. It had special meaning to me, since I had only recently been trained to go “toe-toe.” I loved saying, “Rainy toe-toe,” too. It made me giggle. In fact the whole family seemed to enjoy saying it.

* Visiting Rangitoto. I remember walking half way up the mountain, then being invited to sit by the path with Mom, while Dad and Sister went on up to the crater rim.

Mom surprised me with an orange. This memory is so vivid! It was the first time I had actually watched an orange being

peeled. I recall being concerned because she had no knife to cut it. I was used to juicy slices. "We don't need a knife," she said. Shockingly she proceeded to bite into the orange to start the peel. No! And made a funny face because of the taste. As she peeled, the zesty perfume enthralled me. Then there were the fascinating segments to pull apart daintily and enjoy. One. By. One.

Eventually sister and Dad came back from visiting the crater. The last thing I remember is Dad picking me up and starting back down the path.

* Adopting the Maori *hongi*. This touching of noses was a greeting or kiss. For years, after my bedtime story, my mother's goodnight kiss was always a *hongi*.

* Waving goodbye to friends on the dock with great fanfare, music, and streamers. We were on our way back to the States. What a lovely way to part. Friends holding tight to the ends of stretchy streamers as the ship slipped away.

In the confusion before sailing, someone by the railing handed me a roll of crepe-paper streamer, saying, "Go ahead! You can do it. Just toss it over." And over it went. The whole thing. Oops.

"You have to hold on to one end."

"They can throw it back up."

"Sorry, Honey, it doesn't work that way."

* Feeding the Kangaroos. The *SS Monterey* was carrying freight from Australia with stops in New Zealand, Samoa, Hawaii, and the US. Once we were underway, our steward made sure we met the kangaroos. They were in cages up on the top deck under a protective overhang. Our thoughtful steward provided carrots for our daily visits.

"Mind you don't get your fingers too close to his teeth. He might accidentally bite you. He wouldn't mean to, of course."

"Would he be sorry?"

"Very sorry, Sweetheart."

I was very sorry when my kangaroo friends were off-loaded in Hawaii.

Other stories were retold at family gatherings whenever my folks reminisced about our year in New Zealand.

* On our way there, we stopped in Fiji. Seems my two-year-old feet had outgrown my little white sandals. Our ship steward on the *SS Mariposa* assured Mom she could find sandals in the open-air market by the dock. (I realize now that what transpired next reflected my mother's colonial attitudes toward "the natives.") She was HORRIFIED that the only sandals available were PURPLE! She had always dressed me in PROPER WHITE SANDALS. Actually I quite liked the purple ones,

but they mysteriously disappeared right after we got to our new home in New Zealand.

* Outside the cities, sheep were everywhere. On the way to visit friends—I was wearing a party dress—we came upon a huge herd of sheep blocking the road. Dad was driving. Mom was impatient.

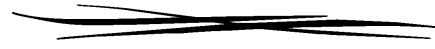
Finally she instructed us all to grab something to shoo with. “Anything!” she said. “Anything you can wave out the window like this!” We were to hang out our open windows and wave wildly and yell, “Shoo! Shoo! Shoo!” Sister took off her cardigan and waved it, while mom swished around Dad’s big handkerchief. Following directions, I confidently hung out my window and shooed. We began to make progress, and eventually, having lost my “shoo-er,” I was yelling, “Sheeps got my pants! Sheeps got my pants!”

* The only treasure from our New Zealand trip that was truly mine was a huge basket with a loop handle and a fitted lid. For years after the trip, it would decorate our baby grand piano in the living room. This is how I came to have it.

On our way back to the States, the ship stopped in Samoa. Mom and Dad admired a big basket for sale there in the dockside open market. “Baby me to Baby you,” the owner said. They looked around for his baby and realized he was pointing back and forth from me to the tall man

standing behind him. Smiling broadly, and with little gestures, he insisted, “No pay! Baby me to Baby you!”

What a lovely generous gift. Though it was awkward to drag back to New York state by train, how could they say “no”? I’m so glad they didn’t.



HIDING

by Anne Baber

On summer evenings, all the kids on the block played Hide and Seek. I didn’t like being IT: I liked to hide,

to squeeze in behind a prickly bush beside a front porch step and wait, straining to hear footsteps approaching.

After a while, the porch lights came on deepening the shadows. I’d scrunch, my eyes closed, convinced I’d be

invisible that way. I’d try breathing through my nose, then with my mouth open. I could hear

my heart beating so loud I was sure it would give me away. In the distance, I’d hear shouts, bursts of short pursuits,

someone giving up or arguing, insistent that rules had been broken. I’d think about moving, wonder if my foot was asleep.

My chest would fill with delicious fear and the sinking certainty that, finally, I would be found. Would IT sneak up

on me and tag me before I could run? At what point would I bolt to escape? The darkness throbbled with terror

and possibility. Excitement churned with the desperate desire to have it over, to run out into the light.



THE QUEUE

The Brits use the term *queue* to mean a line or sequence of people or vehicles awaiting their turn to be attended to or to proceed.

Your Editors use our Queue as a pantry holding the ingredients of yet another delicious issue of *Village Voices*.

Occasionally, some item—prose or poem—will reach its “sell-by” date. Usually, that means it was relevant and timely at one point, but no longer is. We’ll contact the writer and explain.

Frequently, items sit in the Queue-pantry for quite a while. Kathy Hoff’s tale of finding murderers in her family tree was submitted on August 19, 2019. It was exhumed (Is the food metaphor working?) because it fit so perfectly with a theme—Bad Boys—that emerged

when we received Jay Chandler’s history of his work life and Jack Williams’s piece about high jinks.

If you submit something, you should receive a thank-you-for-your-submission note within about a week. Then you may not hear anything for eons. Don’t despair. Your piece is in the Queue.

You’re always welcome to inquire about your piece. Please keep on sending us your delicacies.

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