

CORTLAND COUNTY COMMUNITY ARTS CHALLENGE

WRITING ENTRIES

POETRY

If this were my last spring by Nancy Dickerson.....3

This poem was composed on my daily dog walks after our harsh winter, watching the spring unfold and enjoying every detail.

Joy? by Rachel Vigue Hyde.....4

This is my first attempt at slam poetry. "Slam poetry is a type of poetry expressing a person's personal story and/or struggle, usually in an intensely emotional style. Very powerful, sincere, and moving." *Urban Dictionary*

As I pondered the topic of joy, I found more questions than answers, but regardless, it is the desire of my heart.

Everlasting Joy by John E. Lutz.....5

Writings can be short-lived (Tweet), enduring (Homer), or immortal (Bible). The Bible's words express God's love for humankind. Joyful in its expectations, it provides happiness, triumph and rejoicing in its message. This poem tenders its writings to display its jubilations.

The Joy of Squirrels by Tamie J. Olmsted.....6

This work was inspired by all of those, who have yet to recognize, just how much joy a squirrel can be! As promised, this poem is dedicated to Alfred Saracene.

The Joy of My Life by Tom Steger.....7

Three and a half years ago, my life changed dramatically as our first and only grandchild arrived. I wasn't sure I was ready to be a "Poppop," but everything clicked once I first saw and held him. It's been an ongoing joy to watch this tiny guy grow into an amazing little boy.

The Chase by Martin A. Sweeney.....8

This poem attempts to capture some sage advice about the lifelong, recurring quest for happiness. It reminds us of the joy to be found in each new day, in the act of giving, in collaborating with others, in spiritual moments along life's journey, and in simple childhood pleasures.

Whence Cometh Unanticipated Joy by Martin A.

Sweeney.....10

Joy can come to us via unexpected circumstances. Inspired by an actual, potentially catastrophic incident on Labor Day 2014, this verse seeks to convey the range of emotions experienced before culminating with profound joy.

PROSE

Leave Them There by Meghan Aagaard..... 11

Sometimes joy becomes most clear when viewed from its opposite side: despair. In this story, a mother is following protocol to keep her children safe in wartime – but at what cost? True joy can't be known until it is threatened.

The Joy of Cats by Nancy Dickerson..... 14

While thinking about the theme of joy, which I believe is tied to innocence, I went back to my childhood memories and cats sprung to mind! Most of my happiest memories come from my father and the farm. Since his death five years ago, these memories have been surfacing which bring me joy today!

A Welcome Ache by Dale Harris..... 16

To attain a long held desire and experience the accompanying realization that life is now full of possibility; this is sometimes achieved through happenstance and the beneficiary has a moment of elation. But to work for something important, and succeed? That sense of exultation will always be there.

A Friendship Ignited by Sparks by Helen Leet..... 18

Anna, an elderly woman, discovers the joy of pet ownership and companionship. She also experiences the joy of an intergenerational friendship, and ultimately finds joy in being valued for herself, and what her friendship means to a young boy.

Unexpected Joy by Helen Leet..... 20

Shelly is a middle-aged career woman who had to help raise her younger siblings after her mother died at an early age. Her father died within the past year, and she is experiencing the empty nest syndrome and the challenge of living alone.

Her best friend has talked her into sponsoring a young child with the Bridges for Kids program. Shelly discovers unexpected joy with Matt, the young boy she sponsors. Joy in our lives can come from many sources, sometimes quite unexpectedly.

If this were my last spring

If this were my last spring
(And how am I to know)

I'd sit each day for hours
Just watching the world grow

Flowers, buds, and baby birds
A whole new crop of ants

Green shoots pushing through the snow
Still in their underpants

Every breath would be fresh air
Scented by the new

Breezes pushing out the gray
And bringing in the blue

Skies full of bird song
New feathers finding flight

Lifting up my winter soul
Gently toward the light

Joyfulness of knowing
How much I am alive

Still with roots but reaching up
To see the spring arrive

And with the birds I'd warble
And my soul would start to sing

For life and death and birth again
If this were my last spring

Nancy Dickerson

Joy?

Do I know joy?

Feel it in my heart of hearts?

Appreciate it when it is there, stabilizing whilst floating me free?

Joy - finally holding my child after laboring through the night

Or simply the joy of creation?

Forgiveness? Understanding? Truth?

But wait—sometimes those things are pain, bring pain, draw pain

Can joy and pain interweave like black and gold in the cloth, the very fiber of my being?

*Joy- **because** I know pain, grief, darkness*

*Is it the light pushing me to go on away from Eden that I may taste **its** sweetness?*

The hope of no pain in a world to come?

Joy- brilliant sunset and the memory of it over and over again

Dull with age or varnish with use?

Memory as true as moment?

Joy-sweet giggly smiles born of love and kindness

Happiness? Pleasure? Satisfaction?

Where does one stop and the other begin?

Joy-being one with true self, no violation of my core

Joy-being one with eternal truth and beauty

Uplifting me to a higher plane

My spark of light connecting me with the world

Rejoice: to find joy again and again

“Be glad and rejoice”!

I commit to obey

Everyday find joy

Remember joy

Create joy

Cherish joy

Joy Joy Joy!

Rachel Vigue Hyde

EVERLASTING *Joy*

A FREEFORM POEM OF ETERNAL WORDS

it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor.

You have filled my heart with greater joy
My heart leaps for joy

May the nations be glad and sing for joy
My lips will shout for joy

Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy
let the mountains sing together for joy
we are filled with joy.

There is ... joy for those who promote peace.
A cheerful look brings joy to the heart
Shout aloud and sing for joy

They raise their voices, they shout for joy
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them

Burst into songs of joy together
your heart will throb and swell with joy
afraid yet filled with joy

*I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the
people.*

*that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be
complete.*

and your joy will be complete.

Your love has given me great joy and encouragement
so that our joy may be complete.

I have no greater joy

John E. Lutz

The Joy of Squirrels

**As for me I'd rather see
A silly squirrel at play,
Then to spy a Martin or a Jay**

**Squirrels are skilled acrobats,
To watch is quite a treat**

**And if you get to know them,
You'll find that most are sweet**

**I invite you to take my challenge,
And then you'll surely see,
What a joy a squirrel can be!**

**The next time that you're feeling blue,
This is what I ask if you...**

**Just stop and watch some squirrels awhile,
Then I dare you not to smile!**

**Their squirrely antics have a way,
Of chasing all your blues away**

**So the next time that you feed the birds,
Feed the squirrels as well**

**And this I'm sure,
Their thievery you'll quell**

**And in appreciation
For some peanuts or some corn**

**They'll stay out of your feeders,
For seed they shall not mourn**

**They'll gladly leave it for the birds,
As nuts and berries are preferred**

**Birds and squirrels
You soon will see,
Can live in joyous harmony**

The Joy of My Life

**Gavin Thomas Cameron - "Doodle" to me
Is a boy like no other, as you'll plainly see
That grandson of ours is a one-of-a-kind
You could look for one better, but he, you won't find
With a smile to greet strangers, and a mischievous grin
Whatever he does, it's a guaranteed win
Inquisitive questions, a mind full of "how?"
I have all I can do to answer them now
He asks of me honestly who, why, and when
As soon as I answer, he has questions again
I listen in amazement, as stories he shares
Of monsters and fire trucks, and wild wooly bears
He knows about excavators, dozers, and cranes
Cooking, and fishing, and all kinds of trains
Sirens he mimics with no fault at all
Sounding like ambulances making a call
Identifying birds, wild animals, too
He's a miniature tour guide when we go to the zoo
I find it astonishing that he's learned all this stuff
Yet he keeps learning more, like he's not learned enough
His mind is a sponge, soaking info non-stop
As he asks me quite nicely, "Can I talk to you, Pop?"
He's a whiz-bang about tractors, animals, and books
And when he feels boggled, I see quizzical looks
Until he gets answers, to ease his mind's fears
He's a real wealth of knowledge, beyond his few years
He teases like a grown-up and dishes the dirt
Though he's only a youngster, a three-year-old squirt
He hasn't a sibling, but has ordered one, true
Says it would even be better, if the stork could bring two
He's my buddy, my pal, my sidekick to go
How I got along without him, I surely don't know
I've a daughter, a son, and a wonderful wife
But my only grandchild, Doodle, is the joy of my life!**

Tom Steger

The Chase

Tell me, Grandma...

Will I find happiness in my lifetime?

Hug me close and tell me Joy will be mine.

Teach me the secrets of seventy-seven years;

Your young pupil yearns to know.

You will find Joy, my child,...

Each time you and the sun arise from slumber.

Another miracle awaits, immersing you.

So stretch, breathe in deeply, and beam a broad smile of exultation

As you catch the sweet sweet sweet sound of a yellow warbler.

You will discover Joy, my child,...

In the pleasure of creating new life,

A poem, a painting, a song, a story,

A theory, an equation, a recipe, a dance, a cure.

Bliss is begotten of giving, not taking.

You will learn Joy, my child,...

As when all seemed futile with the death of the Galilean.

Nonsensical nihilism reigned supreme

Until the breaking of the Bread --

Inexplicable elation on the road to Emmaus.

You will experience Joy, my child,...

Each time you harness to the yoke with others,
Striving with grit to attain a common goal
And succeeding or failing
You all laugh until your sides hurt.

Remember, my child...

The sheer glee of running barefoot through the night grass,
Capturing sparkling fireflies in a canning jar
Learning the greater happiness
From releasing the bioluminescence back into the eternal void.

Tell your children, my child...

You cannot run from Sorrow;
He will always find you.
Joy, however, is elusive;
She expects to be chased, found, and then released...
To begin the game anew
And tauntingly laughs, "I'm not a sure thing."

Martin A. Sweeney

Whence Cometh Unanticipated Joy

The call comes in.

Anxiety and Dread are summoned to the phone.

There's a "disturbance" at the museum.

We rush to the scene with hearts pounding.

Two scarlet and white trucks await us;

Red flashing beacons of light

Cause more rivulets of adrenalin to flow.

Men clad for a battle with an ancient foe hold axes at the ready.

Acrid smoke seeps ominously out from under the museum door.

The key nervously unlocks the portal to the precious Past.

Squinting eyes rush into the surreal haze.

Near the window a magnifying glass on a stand is the culprit,

Concentrating late summer rays of sunlight

(Generating heat, flame, smoke, terror) --

A laser beam upon a corner of a History Day poster,

Charring a piece of cloth draped over sepia-toned images in a box.

Forty dollars of damage;

No walls scorched, no artifacts incinerated.

The vestiges of the past remain miraculously inviolate.

The Past is preserved.

The magnifying glass is sent to a dark corner

Like a schoolboy caught playing with matches.

A fan sucks out our fear with the fumes.

Thoughts of what might have been remain

As the vigilant alarm abruptly ceases its wail of warning.

Relief is palpable; the proverbial bullet has been dodged.

The Keepers of the Past express their prayerful gratitude,

And Giddiness and Joy kiss late into the night.

Leave Them There

London, England. September 1939.

“This itches,” Faye said. She looked up at her mother, scratching and tugging at the cord that looped down her cardigan.

Alice reached down and pulled out the string, tucking it behind the little girl’s red collar with a quick pat. “There now, that’s better, isn’t it.” She tried to smile at her daughter, but a feeble turn of the mouth was all she could manage.

On this otherwise clear September morning, Paddington Station was bedlam; Alice needed time to think, to remember. To pause and look at her children for a few last precious moments. Why were all of these teachers singing songs? And why were the police pushing people along? This was no happy holiday. This was good bye.

She grabbed at Faye’s and Eddie’s hands and steered them around a weeping woman sitting on the ground, a ragged handkerchief crushed in her hands. Alice quickly turned away. One glance and she’d be a melting mess herself, unable to see off her children like everybody told her she should. Was this all it took, to remove the joy from her life? A train station and a couple of name tags?

Finally she spotted Eddie’s teacher, Miss Bertram, and a few others from High Street School. They were lined up, corralling a posse of tagged children like ever so many stunned goats, and one teacher was holding a banner above their heads. A dark haired girl standing with them showed another child her bucket and spade; “for when we’re at the seaside,” she told him.

“Over here, loves,” Alice said, bending down so that the children could hear her over the puffing engines and shuffling feet.

Eddie gripped her hand more tightly now, even as he turned to wave to Johnny Ellis, his best friend, who was sitting on a smothered black duffle near the tracks.

“See? Now there’s Johnny, and you two will have a grand time...” Alice stopped. Her voice was caught in her throat, and she swallowed, pushing down the fear like a lump of soggy potatoes.

Johnny’s mother, Ruth, lived in the flat across the row, and she came over to Alice as soon as she saw them. “It’ll be alright, dear, you’ll see!” Ruth smiled at Alice, but her eyes were dark, and glistening. “Better to the country for a few bright weeks than into the hands of Hitler. You know what they say.”

Alice moved instinctively closer to her friend, pulling the children with her and almost tripping over Faye’s little bag. The mention of Hitler reminded her of those leering posters that were tacked around the children’s school and the neighbourhood shops: a plea to send your child away, to avoid the inevitable bombings. ‘Children are safer in the country...leave them there,’ they begged.

“Hallo Eddie!” Miss Bertram called out suddenly, her voice bright. “All set?”

Alice looked down at Eddie, seven years old last month, with his gas mask looped around one shoulder, and a small bag gripped tightly in his hands. He was such a responsible little boy; Alice knew he’d still be holding just as tightly to those things when he arrived at the other end.

("Maybe they'll get sent to a country estate!" a neighbour had told her with a smile just last night.)

And Faye...she was only four. Alice had tried, unsuccessfully, to convince her daughter that she was going on a holiday, just like the teachers had encouraged. But Faye didn't understand what a holiday was, and she had never been separated from her mother for even a night.

Ruth touched her arm. "Go on, then," she said, giving Alice a little smile. "Johnny went with no fuss. He and Eddie can sit together. It's for the best. Let's be happy for them."

"Right," Alice murmured. She felt the familiar sting in her eyes again, and tried desperately to wipe the corners with her shirtsleeve. Whoever had made up this absurd story about the children getting a joyful holiday, or parents having to put on a brave face, was full of claptrap.

She put a hand on Eddie's shoulder and led him over to Miss Bertram, regretting with every thick footstep that she had even left the house this morning.

"Do I have to go now?" Eddie said, turning to Alice. His hazel eyes held tones of confusion, and he began fiddling with the wretched gas mask.

Alice nodded, biting so hard into her upper lip that she could taste blood. Had he remembered to bring his teddy bear? The little corduroy one she had made him last Christmas? He slept with that teddy every night.

Miss Bertram bent down to check his tag, and nodded with approval at Alice. "Thank you, ma'am," she said. "Eddie's all set now. Why don't you go bring your little one down to her teachers?"

Alice could swear her heart was about to break its way through her jacket. She grabbed for one last touch of her son's hand, and tried to give him a stoic smile. Tears were rolling down her face in an excruciating deluge, and Eddie was beginning to look frightened.

One of the teachers standing nearby noticed, and pulled Eddie to her with a matronly grip. "Cheer up! Your boy will be safe. Remember to smile!" the woman demanded.

Alice tore herself away, half daring her eyes to find Eddie for one last glance, and wove through the throng of families with a sniffling Faye heavy in her arms. No time to think of Eddie now. Onto the next.

It wasn't hard to see where the littlest children were assembling. This lot was crying; they held handkerchiefs and dolls, so different from the older children who seemed to accept their fate with a composure Alice could not comprehend.

"Hallo there, darling," said one of Faye's teachers, and she reached out for the girl. "Aren't you happy to travel to the countryside? You'll see cows and horses! Won't that be grand!"

Grand. As in, full of joy? The irony of it hit her full force. Alice pulled back, stepping away from the woman's outstretched arms.

How could her life be joyful without her children? Theirs without her? What if they ended up boarding with someone who was cruel to them? What would all of the bombing in the East End mean then? These thoughts had occurred to Alice before; she just had managed to suppress them until now, the moment of truth.

Joy was just about the only thing they had left. Paul was stationed out on the coast; they hadn't seen him in four months. Decent food was hard to come by; meals were meagre and quiet. Air raids, and the heavy tension they brought with them, were constant. But love, and occasional laughter, and comfort in each other. All of that amounted to at least a handful of joy. It was all they had. And Alice was about to ship it off, to some other woman's house.

"We've got to board the little ones, Mrs. Tanner," Faye's teacher was telling her. "It's time to say goodbye. With a smile, please." The woman smiled at Alice, her face betraying just the tiniest bit of annoyance.

Alice pressed Faye's head into her shoulder and kissed the top of her head, tasting honey blonde curls and cheap lye soap. Her heart was pounding so hard she thought she might collapse right on the grey pavement of the station. "Where's Eddie?" she said suddenly.

She pushed her way back through the crowd, gripping her daughter to her chest and fighting a stream of dazed families.

"Eddie!" she called out, seeing Johnny Ellis about to board one of the cars. "Eddie, we're going home!"

From one of the windows in the train, a tiny head popped out. It was her son, his face covered in the remains of a chocolate bar one of the supervisors had given him.

"Mum!" he cried, pulling desperately at the tag around his neck. "Wait for me!"

And there he was, tumbling off the train, tripping on the last step, and brushing past a station agent who tried to pull at his gas mask. "Mummy!" He hurled himself into Alice's arms with a sob of relief.

Alice sank to her knees, arms heavy with a wonderful weight. "No holiday for you," she said, feeling the fear creep into her mind even as she said it, knowing it was the right thing to do.

Ruth and one of the teachers tried to stop her as she made for the Winsland Street exit, taking in deep breaths of the sooty air and feeling as sure as she ever had. She could see Miss Bertram, waving frantically and gesturing to a policeman as she caught sight of the Tanners' exodus.

One of those wretched posters stared at her as they emerged onto the bright street, tacked to a street lamp and curling at the edges. "MOTHERS: Send them out of London," it implored, smacking Alice in the face like a wayward kite.

Not this time, she thought forcefully. They would figure out another way, a way they could all be together. She looked down at her children, who were holding tight to her hands as she strove to get beyond the dark pull of the train station.

They were smiling.

Meghan Aagaard

The Joy of Cats!

Mommy, I want a kitten!

There were kittens on my grandfather's farm, and he fed them by squirting milk into their open mouths while milking the cows. They were cute and furry, they smelled like warm milk and purred in my ear, and I wanted one. It didn't matter to me then who would have to clean the litter box, and feed and water it, and keep the fleas out of the house. My mother was a more practical sort. She worked as a nurse and had three young children, more than enough to keep her busy. She didn't like cats then, and hasn't much use for them now. I can picture her turning up her nose at the idea of an animal in the house that would drop dead mice on the doorstep, kill birds, and shed. But I am assuming her arguments didn't hold water with Dad. Either that or I was a relentless six year old. One day he came in from the farm at lunchtime, and told me to go out and get the milk buckets from the pickup. I was small and the pickup truck was old and rusty. I had to climb up the running board to hoist myself into the cab. There on the seat was a small black and white kitten with orange spots! The joy I felt at that moment I can remember to this day, fifty years later.

That poor kitten had no idea what was in store for her. My sister and I treated her like our dolls, dressed her up, swung her in a basket from a tree branch, and for some reason I can't remember, put her in the mailbox in the course of our daily play. She nevertheless survived and became a momma cat. At the time, I didn't ask who the father was, as the lesson on sex hadn't been taught yet. She had a litter of kittens in the closet where my shoes were kept, and I learned about birth. I watched as she licked them clean, fed them quietly, and closed her eyes as she purred to them while they kneaded her belly with their tiny paws. I learned to feed them and give them fresh cow's milk, and did my best to keep them away from the road. I learned to carry them gently, sometimes by the scruff of their necks, and knew what type of petting would cause them to scratch and draw blood. They became a part of my world, sure as the sun rises and sets each day.

I also learned about dying.

While waiting for the school bus in the driving rain, we watched one of our kittens drown in a flooded storm drain, just out of our reach. I saw a stillbirth and the look of pain on the momma's face as she desperately tried to lick the baby back to life. If I look back, there was a lot I learned from cats about being a mother. Perhaps this is why Mom tolerated the cats we had throughout my childhood. She also managed to agree to the stray dogs I brought home from the fields, and later the horses that took up most of my teenage years.

Today, I tolerate cats.

I am allergic to their dander, and don't have any appreciation for the fur on the furniture, or the fur-balls on the floor. I am not surprised by dead mice, or even live ones that are dropped at my feet. I make sure our two cats don't get hit by cars or mauled by the dogs. I suffer through the yearly vet visits, having to corral them into travel crates. I grudgingly clean the litter boxes, and pay for their flea treatments.

I take Claritin daily.

But I will always remember the joy that entered my house the day I told my daughter we could bring a kitten home from the local horse farm. I told her we could borrow her for the day to play with, but then she would have to go back to the barn. I didn't think our older cat would tolerate her home being invaded by a new upstart. The little black long haired kitten with pearly eyes could fit in a teacup then, and the girls played all day making a suitable home for her in the hayloft. This same cat now sits beside me twelve years later enjoying the sun through the window. She grew up with my daughter who took care of her as if she was a precious child. We also took in three golden striped kittens born in the barn to a feral cat who was eventually hit by a car. They were named, loved and soon found homes, and my daughter had to learn to let them go. As it would happen, the largest and most curious kitten was returned due to his ferocious behavior, and at 26 pounds he terrorizes my house to this day. As a kitten, he reminded us about the joy of play. He was always in the moment, ready to pounce on a stray sunbeam, or launch a sneak attack at our legs as we crossed the room.

We moved all three cats, one black, one white, and one orange, across town six years ago. Shortly after, I sat one afternoon in late autumn with our first cat in my arms, a white Siamese cross with bright blue eyes, waiting for her to take her last breath. She had come to us from the SPCA and had survived four moves. Her specialty was lying against the ping pong net and swatting the ball as it was hit back and forth. This same cat helped my daughter when she was just six through a difficult divorce, helped her to make new friends, and helped her to feel less lonely when she didn't have a friend nearby. I whispered my thanks to her as she was dying for all the good things she brought to my family. I hope to do the same for the other two when the time comes. I will always be grateful for the joyful moments shared and the lessons learned from the cats in my life.

Nancy Dickerson

A Welcome Ache

The ache was still there when she awoke, although not as pronounced as when finally she succumbed to sleep. Surprisingly it hadn't hindered her slumber; she was fully rested. Early morning light rushed through the window and for some reason her room seemed more vibrant than usual.

She arose and stepped out the door to the small bathroom that she shared with her parents and brother. Under cold fluorescent light she examined her face just under both of her dark eyes. There were no visible marks or acute pain as she gently rubbed a finger over each side of her face. She placed the fingertips of both hands against her face and massaged her cheeks, feeling some small relief.

Where did this pain come from? It wasn't debilitating, hardly worth noting. It was, however, unfamiliar, and she needed to understand it. She deliberated as she brushed her teeth and washed up quickly; her mother would want the room shortly.

She returned to her room and dressed. It was Saturday; a work day. Her father and mother had worked at many menial jobs for several years, saving what they could, but always saving something. A small building became available, and a used oven. Fortunately the hard work and diligence came installed.

They sold American style breads and pastries, even developing a cake doughnut recipe that was now a mainstay of the business. They also made traditional rolls and treats from recipes brought with them to America, a collection inherited from both sides of her family. Her father and brother worked nights, baking and baking. She and her mother worked days, selling from the display case in the front of the building. A couple of years into the endeavor allowed room for a counter with four swivel seats, and a coffee machine. She marveled at how much money there was in coffee. The seats were always occupied, and the coffee flowed from seven in the morning until three in the afternoon, or until they sold out of baked goods, which was happening more often since word had gotten around. The family had done fairly well financially, but her parents had kept the small apartment in which they lived and still saved as much as possible. Their children were going to college and there was no room for argument.

She took her jacket from the closet and went to sit in the kitchen. She and her mother would walk to the bakery together. She peered out the window, checking for robins, her favorite bird. She thought how fantastic it was to have a home where she could sit for a few minutes and look for robins. No police thumping on the door at midnight, throwing her father into the street. No blackouts at night, no hour-long lines for soap, water in the house instead of carrying it from a well, a flushing toilet!

A robin lighted on a branch of the lilac bush; she smiled.

The ache crept back.

She froze for a moment.

Of course! Her face hurt because she had spent the previous day smiling! For hours!

It was right after court. *That's* when it started, although she hadn't been aware of it. She was standing, hand in the air, repeating after the judge, concentrating intently to avoid any mistake. Then it was done. A silence lay over the room, enveloping the polished oak paneling, rebounding off the high walls, smothering the gathering of spectators and participants. She remembered wondering, "Is that all?"

The judge enlightened her, years of experience evident in his voice: "To all gathered here today, I present to you our newest American citizens!"

And she smiled. Throughout the cacophony of applause that she couldn't believe had arisen from this tiny assemblage. She smiled as her family applauded and hooted as they had learned from the daytime television shows that night workers watch. She smiled as the judge, moving amongst the others who had also taken the oath (how similar to the one taken by the president!) came to her, grasped her hand and congratulated her. Did she thank him? She couldn't remember! Did she smile? Oh, yes, she smiled for the rest of the day. She smiled all through dinner at the restaurant; a place for only truly notable occasions. She smiled all the way home, and even in her bed she smiled while she tried without result to fall asleep.

Now, smiling at a robin, her journey was recalled. The facts and theories, grasped easily enough. The language had been the most intimidating challenge, and the most rewarding. She suspected it always would be so, at least until she was fluent. She had learned the history, the culture, the unique *essence* of America.

How the Americans argued with one another! About everything! You like YooHoo? You're a fool! Well it's better than that root beer you always have!

Worst president in the history of the country! What? You're out of your mind; this is the finest administration in a century!

How 'bout them Cowboys? Oh, please, the Cowgirls? You want a team, watch New England! And then some exchange of profanities, or rude gestures, followed by laughter. And then they carried on with whatever they were doing.

Did they know? She often wondered. Did they know how blessed they were to live in a place where you could insult the president, and if a police officer heard you, he would as likely as not twitch a lip and nod in agreement? But certainly you would not be arrested! A place where on many days the most menacing challenge was choosing a place to eat because you didn't feel like cooking? Where you could buy soap in five minutes? Where the *government* answered to *you*!

Her mother appeared and she smiled. It was returned, and she jumped to embrace her, she who had made this possible. Her face started to ache a little again, and it was a far happier hurt than she could have ever imagined.

A Friendship Ignited by Sparks

Her age-speckled hands gently secured the sod around the colorful geraniums. Tears weaved down her wrinkled cheeks. Sighing heavily, Anna gave the mound a final pat. Beneath the mound of firmly packed earth, a long-time companion now lay. Steadying herself with her four-point cane, she struggled to her feet. Now, she'd lost Sparks and probably Jeremy, too, she thought.

For over ten years, Sparks had been her constant companion. The caramel coated cocker spaniel had captured her heart at their impromptu meeting. Jed Carpenter, a young farmer, had arrived at her doorstep on a frosty October morning.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ripler. This young pup was dropped off at our farm last night. We have three dogs already. I thought perhaps you'd appreciate some company in this big ol' house of yours."

"Well, I . . .," Anna stuttered in surprise.

"Looks like a cocker spaniel to me. They're a real affectionate breed. Here!" Jed held out the wiggly puppy.

Large, soft brown eyes beckoned her. Cautiously she lifted the warm, squiggling body into her arms. He instantly snuggled against her bosom.

"There now," Jed grinned. "I knew you two were made for each other!" Jed was already backing away from her door. He hurried off, not giving her a chance to protest.

Gently Anna stroked the pup's soft, curly fur. His pink tongue was already tasting her hands and sweater. "You poor little orphan," Anna said soothingly, "Let's get you inside out of the cold, and find you a bite to eat."

His name was revealed to her the following day when his attack on an extension cord had produced sparks. Anna laughed out loud as she recalled the startled look on his face, and the way his ears had shot up into the air.

Together they had happily shared her old, rambling house. The two had taken daily walks, shared meals, greeted many guests, and had slept together each night.

Last winter, when Anna had slipped on the ice, unable to get up, it had been Sparks that struggled through deep snow all the way to Jed's house. If Sparks had not alerted the neighbors, Anna would have frozen to death in her own backyard.

That's when young Jeremy had entered her life. The shaggy-haired youth had shyly followed his dad, Jed, into her hospital room.

"Mrs. Ripler, Jeremy here has something to tell you," Jed announced. The small boy looked frightened. His dad nudged him closer to the bed. "Go on, son," he coaxed.

"Mrs. Ripler . . .," he spoke hesitantly.

"Yes, dear, what is it?" Anna asked, wondering what the lad's father had put him up to.

"I'd like to help take care of Sparks for you, until your hip is better. I'd feed him, take him on walks, and keep him company. He sure is a smart dog!"

Anna sighed and smiled broadly. "Oh, Jeremy, that would please me greatly! I've been lying here worrying about Sparks, wondering how he'd manage without me. Thank you *so much* for your generous offer."

“Great! It’s a deal!” He pumped her hand vigorously, and skipped out of the room.

Over the past year, she had grown terribly fond of the young lad. Visions of Sparks and Jeremy rolling and frolicking in the snow, flashed in her mind’s eye. Sparks had eagerly awaited Jeremy’s arrival each day after school. The young boy always told entertaining stories of school and family life. Sometimes they played dominoes or checkers with Sparks at their feet.

An odd empty sensation ventured into Anna’s stomach. Her hand clutched her cane more tightly. She did not want to think of the empty days ahead of her. Surely, with Sparks gone, Jeremy would have no reason to continue his daily visits. She briskly wiped tears from her cheeks.

“You foolish old woman,” she chastised her self, “Of course Jeremy has better things to do than sit around with an old lady. Stop slobbering.” Despite her self-admonishments, sobs escaped her as she slowly climbed the stairs into her house.

As she entered the living room, the flashing red light on the answering machine caught her eye. As she listened to Jeremy’s perky voice, her heart sank.

“I’m not able to come see you today, Mrs. Ripler, but I hope to visit soon.”

Late into the night, Anna sat rocking in her recliner, reminiscing about Sparks, Jeremy, and her life in general. She realized that she had allowed them to become the center of her life. “I have to refocus. I have to find a new goal, a new purpose in life, or I’ll be hopelessly lost,” she resolved. It was two a.m. before she had completed a list of tasks that she hoped would offer direction to her life.

The following morning, she retrieved a half-finished quilt from her closet. She invited Sarah, a long ignored friend, over to assist with the quilting. The women shared stories, tea and lunch.

Anna smiled as she bid farewell to her friend. What a pleasant morning it had been, and it had passed by swiftly. Fatigued from her late night endeavors, Anna napped in the recliner.

“Mrs. Ripler! Wake up! Are you okay?” Jeremy’s anxious voice startled Anna. Her eyes flew open. Bright blue eyes peered into hers. “If I go for a walk with you, can we have cookies and milk afterward? . . . as usual?”

Anna’s heart swelled with joy. She hugged the young boy briefly. “You bet we can!”

“This quilt is very pretty. Did you make it?” Jeremy inquired, as his fingers lightly traced the quilted pattern.

“My friend, Sarah, and I are working on it,” Anna replied proudly.

“Mrs. Ripler. . . I was wondering. Would it be okay if I come after school to visit you? I mean, I know you don’t need me for Sparks, but I like to talk to you, and play dominoes...”

“Well, I’m quite busy, you know, but I’d love to have you visit me. I may need your help with some of the chores around here. And who knows, maybe I could find another puppy . . .” “Oh! Mrs. Ripler! That’d be awesome! Guess what Randy Anderson said in school today, right in front of the teacher?” He continued to chatter as the back door closed behind them, and they strolled hand in hand along the path in the backyard.

UNEXPECTED JOY

Shelly was feeling irritable. She replayed the conversation she had had with her best friend, Mitzi, this a.m.

“Mitzi, I just don’t think I’ll be very good at this.”

“Shelly, you are the kindest and most tender-hearted person I know. This will be perfect for you. These kids really just need someone to show some interest in them. Don’t feel you have to spend lots of money on them. Just spending time, taking walks, reading books, playing games; that is what they need. Pleassssse, do it for three months, just for me? Besides, you still owe me for. . .”

“Oh, boy, not that old ploy again! Yes, I do still owe you for helping me get moved into my apartment. “

“Not only moved in, but I also cleaned and painted most of that apartment for you- **by myself**- while you were at that conference for work in Florida.”

“Hey, that conference was a great opportunity; I *know* that my attendance there led to my promotion at work. The timing of it was not the best, though. I do appreciate all the work you did for me and such an excellent job at that, but. . .”

“No buts about it! You owe me **now**. You’ve already completed the training. My Bridges for Kids program needs sponsors. Most of these children are from stressful home environments. You will be a mentor to a child. Hopefully, the activities and time you share with this child will result in increased self-esteem and a greater feeling of worth in that child. What could be a better mission in life?”

“Get down off your soapbox. I’m not even a parent, what makes you think I would be a good influence?”

“You practically raised your two younger sisters and your brother after your mom died twelve years ago. They all turned out great! You know they think of you as their second mom!”

Shelly squirmed. “If I was such a great second mom to them, why have they all moved out of state? “

“That’s easy! They are confident, capable adults. They are smart, too. After finishing college, they wanted to live in warmer climates. Can’t fault them for that!”

“That is a sore subject. I still feel abandoned. Since dad died last year, and I sold the house, living alone has been a challenge.”

“See what I mean? You need a companion. You need someone to share your time and thoughts with! You will be a perfect sponsor. I’m telling you!”

“And I’m telling you that I don’t think I am up to it right now. Besides, I still have my dog, Ajax. She is a great companion.”

“Shelly. Listen to me. We only ask for a commitment of three hours or so a week. You really do owe me big time, and I am calling in the chips. Stop pouting. I have the perfect child for you to sponsor. She actually looks a bit like your sister Sarah. You will love her! I’ll see you at the YWCA on Saturday at 11:00 a.m. Don’t you dare disappoint me!” She gave Shelly a quick hug and ran out the door.

Last June Shelly had been so grateful to move into her half house apartment in the country. She lived a few miles from the small city, and loved the large backyard. She watched now as Ajax, a playful yellow lab, chased the falling leaves in circles.

“Ajax! Let’s go inside.” Ajax trotted over to follow her into the house. Even though it was only 4:30, it was already beginning to darken down for the night.

The week passed by swiftly, and Saturday arrived with blustery winds and temps in the 30’s. Shelly arrived at the YWCA promptly at 11:00 a.m. Mitzi greeted her as soon as she entered the YWCA. “I had to make a last minute change. I need you to sponsor Matt. The girl I had planned to assign to you has moved out of state. “

“Who is Matt?”

“He is the boy in the Batman T-shirt”, Mitzi answered, as she pointed to a small, dark curly haired, dark-skinned young boy. His Batman T-shirt was too large, his red pants were too long on him, and his sneakers were tattered. Standing at the edge of the room, he looked a bit overwhelmed.

Walking over to the small boy, Shelly knelt down and said, “Hi, Matt. I am Shelly and I want to be your friend. “

Matt stared at her and said, “I wanted a man, not a woman. Why don’t you go pick out a girl?”

Shelly replied, “I guess they have run out of girls for me. It would please me if you would let me be your friend. Do you like dogs? I have a dog named Ajax.”

“Ajax! That’s a funny name for a dog.” Matt commented. “Well. . . I guess I can spend time with you today. Maybe next week I can have a man.”

“That’s the spirit! Are you ready to go?” Sandy asked.

Matt nodded his head and ran for the door.

Matt climbed into the backseat of her van, sat in the booster chair, and buckled himself in. His eyes scanned the inside of the van.

“This is a nice car! Lots of room. Do you have kids at home?”

“No. I only have Ajax. Are you hungry? Would you like to eat some place?”

“I would love to go to McDonald’s. We never get to go there, and I love the French fries.” Shelly turned in time to see the wistful look of hope on his face.

She smiled. “I love McDonald’s myself. Let’s go there first, okay?”

Matt smiled broadly, showing that he was missing his front incisors. “I’d like that, Ms. Shelly.”

Matt ate his McDonald’s Happy Meal as if he had not eaten in three days. When they arrived at the house, Ajax came running, giving Matt a welcoming lick on his cheek. Matt smiled and gave her a big hug. “You are a nice dog, Ajax, even if you have a weird name!”

“Since the weather is rather lousy, I thought we could play some games, bake cookies, or try some painting. What would you like to do?”

Matt was busy checking out the house... he walked through the living room, testing the couch and chairs. He searched her books on her shelves. “You sure have a lot of books! Have you read them all?” He asked in amazement.

“I’ve read a lot of them, but some of them are reference books that I look at when I am working on a project for work.”

“What kind of work do you do?” Matt’s big brown eyes searched her face.

“I’m a graphic designer. I design advertising, I make brochures. Here are some examples of what I do,” and she handed him a large photo album that contained sleeves with her various projects in them.

Shelly was pleased that Matt was so interested in her work. He sat on the couch and slowly went through her samples. Shelly joined him on the couch, and was surprised how interested she was in his comments.

“I like this one, the colors are so bright!” Matt commented. “Look at this tiger! How did you get so close to take that picture of him?” Matt was viewing a brochure she had made for the local zoo.

She grabbed her camera and sat next to Matt. "With this camera I can make subjects look close when they are actually quite far away."

"Can I see your camera?" Matt asked eagerly.

"Sure, but we have to be very careful with it."

"I know that! These cameras cost a lot of money!" Matt commented. "Can you take a picture of me and Ajax?"

"Certainly! I can even give you a copy to take home!"

"That would be awesome!"

The afternoon passed by swiftly. Shelly was surprised when it was 3:00 and time for Matt to be returned to the YWCA.

"Matt, I have enjoyed your company very much today. I am sorry the time passed so quickly. We didn't even get to play any games."

"You know what Ms. Shelly? I had a great time today, even if you are a girl! Can I come again next week? Maybe we can play some games, or maybe you can teach me how to take those awesome pictures you take!"

Shelly looked at his bright eyes, and genuine smile. She could hear the excitement in his voice. "I think it would be fun to help you learn to take pictures, Matt. I know Ajax will love playing with you if we have some better weather next time."

"Great!" Matt said, giving her a quick hug before running to the van.

When she dropped him off at the YWCA, Matt ran over to his mom, excitedly showing her his picture. His mom was a young woman who was carrying a young baby, while she also tried to keep hold of a squirming toddler. Matt was chattering constantly. His mom smiled at him, and turned to say "thank you" to Shelly.

"He was a delight. We have already talked about plans for next week."

Shelly smiled as she drove home. She was surprised how happy she felt.

"What a joy Matt is!" Perhaps spending time with Matt **had** been exactly what she needed. She was eager to see him next week, and was already thinking of some activities that they could tackle.

When she returned home, she noticed a message on her phone. It was from Mitzi. Hmm! Would she tell her friend that she had been right after all? Probably not . . . at least not yet.