

parents of the heart

by Marcia Byalick

Think about it. There aren't many people in this world who really know you and love you anyway. After the two who conceived you, the one you promised to love and honor and the few you created, the number

of entirely honest relationships in your life depends on certain factors. How up are you for a variety of exhausting, delicate, powerful mind melds? How much time and energy will you sacrifice for a relationship not affected by competition, physical

pleasure, material profit or sense of duty? Your answers reveal how important it is to you for the person asking "how are you?" to want to hear the truth. During this month of celebrating romance, I'd like to put in a plug for what I regard as "the other white meat" of loving . . . the delicious, instinctive connection of friendship.

I don't know when I started noticing all the Valentine's Day cards geared to friendships, but I immediately thought it was a great idea. For a bond that has no civil and few emotional rights in our society, its effects on our sense of well being are amazing. If friendship were a drink it would be one part chicken soup, one part cappuccino and one part martini. If it were a thing, it would be a life preserver, or maybe a security blanket. True friends strengthen each other, rest on each other and minister to each other. And I think what makes us friends is as chemical, magical and mysterious as what makes us lovers.



"Gorilla," a 30" x 27" acrylic enamel and oil pastel on a movie poster is by Ruth Nasca of East Hampton. The artist is represented by the Prism Gallery, 503 Main Street in Port Jefferson.

...heart

Still in my life are two women with whom I shared Bonomo's Turkish Taffy, Archie comic books and crushes on Davy Crockett and Spin and Marty. We played doctor, borrowed each other's clean white shirt for assembly and went out for Chinese food, splitting a combination plate, on Saturday afternoons. Later we talked for hours on the one telephone in the house and shopped for prom dresses, wedding gowns and baby clothes. We shaved our legs together in the bathtub for the first time and shared dozens of other firsts — emotional, sexual and gynecological. One friend even shared her urine, apportioning some for me when I "couldn't go" during the physical exam for the New York City teacher's license. Decades later we're still sharing firsts.

Just as it's true that you can only be as happy as your unhappiest child, so too do friends exert a powerful influence over our moods. That's how you know the difference between a friend and an acquaintance. Gym buddies, work buddies, and book club buddies inquire after our outward life; friends, after our inner life. As with any love supplying us with the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe, friendship can also open our souls to hurt and grief. Struggling with the cancer, divorce, widowhood and death of my friends has challenged me and shaken everything I believe in.

"Female friendships that work," according to Louise Bernikow in her book, *Among Women*, "are relationships in which women help each other belong to themselves." All my sweet soul mates are bur-nished with use. They shine with hundreds of laughs and silent we're-on-the-same-wavelength glances. I can think aloud and be stupid with them. They tell me when there's lipstick on my teeth, notice when I've lost some weight and ignore when I've put on five pounds. My friends have expanded my universe, encouraging me to stretch, take

risks and become more flexible. I trust their opinions on books and mothering, on doctors and what color looks best on me. They really listen when I talk and really read what I write, and I work hard to return the favor.

And so I hope my friends read this, my valentine to them . . . for their nurturing kindness and sense of humor and their role as a safety net in this splintering world. I wish you no less.



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snow white lies

by Marcia Byalick

When I was a little girl, I believed that liars were a crooked, disloyal, corrupt breed. By the time I reached high school, I noticed that the kids who lied the best were most likely to be popular. In college I watched in awe as a boy I knew told gullible coeds that the scab he picked on his arm was a wound he received while skeet shooting. He also told them that he was studying to be a D.Yd . . . a doctor of yacht design. He crafted these fantasies to make himself seem bigger and better. And from my vantage point, he usually succeeded.

I fancied myself a poor liar. Whenever I told a fib (Fib sounds so much more innocent, don't you think?), it was never with the fluency and ease it took to be a master. If I colored my commentary, the higher pitch of my voice and my earnest attempt to commit the facts to my memory usually gave me away. Lies were necessary for cowards like me who would go to any lengths to avoid confrontation, but they also required a measure of comfort with taking a risk that I never attained.

Today I've come to terms with the fact that we're all hardwired to deceive, that the capacity to mislead others is rooted in our nature. A truism like "honesty is the best policy" has lost favor, along with the tooth fairy. I tried to instill in my daughters the importance of telling the truth; I even

reinforced the message with threats of dire punishment. Yet I knew all the while there'd be plenty of lies they'd have to tell; otherwise the world would eat them alive.

I can barely keep count of the lies I tell each week. That number is only exceeded by the number of lies that are told to me. This morning I heard from my garage that, "Your car will be ready tomorrow morning," and from the washing machine repairman, "I'll be there between nine and twelve."

My busy neighbor said, as we brought out our garbage cans, "We should get together for lunch. I'll give you a call next week." In the mail two advertisers lied about what it would cost for their services and a local congressman lied about what he expected to accomplish this year.

I tell myself my lies save someone else's feelings, just as I tell myself that my weight is just as accurate if I hold on to the wall when I get on the scale. But mine are not the snow white lies designed to protect an innocent soul from the awful truth of: "That dress is ugly." "I hate your cooking." "I don't know

how you could have married him." "I'd rather stay home than go to your house for dinner." I tell my lies so that others will think of me as caring and considerate. I find myself voluntarily making promises I'll probably break, convincing myself that I'm just lubricating my social relationships.

"I'll send you a copy of that article." "I'll fax you the name of the store." "I want to see that show too. I'll call you to check the dates." "Let me know if I can help." "Stop by on

Forms and Rhythm is a 16" x 20" watercolor by Kay W. Ray of Merrick. You'll find more of Ray's work at www.paintingsdirect.com. She can be reached via e-mail at penwomankr@aol.com or in her studio, 516-868-4044.



your way out east.” In the world of virtual reality, I make virtual promises. And I get away with it. In 2002 it seems we half expect people not to keep their word. A guy who promises to call and doesn’t would be known as a creep in my day. (Ugh, I can’t believe I’m old enough to have a day.) Today he’s just afraid of commitment. A friend who says she’ll call and doesn’t is over-committed and too busy to keep her promise. No one’s to blame; it’s the pace of modern life, right?

What’s uncomfortable is that increasingly it’s become the truth that makes me flinch, not the lie. As I encourage my daughter to grab another goody bag at some special event, coaching her to say it’s for some celebrity; as I remain silent when we go to the movies and we ask for four senior tickets when only three of us are seniors; as I tell the charities soliciting us at dinner that I already gave, I see there’s nothing white about my lies. Maybe there’s some sense of redemption in the fact that my actions are beginning to worry me.

Ironically, I take advantage of our tell-all culture where confession has risen to an art form to absolve myself of my sins. The people I’ve known throughout my life who’ve told the most lies were the loneliest. So I vow from now on to be aware of whether when I tell a lie, it protects the other person or me. If it’s me, I’m going to be brave enough to risk not winning the “most popular” designation. We are, after all, only as good as our word.



Marcia Byalick of Searingtown is a freelance writer and a regular contributor to Distinction.

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being taken for a ride

by Marcia Byalick

*"It's better to be wounded . . . than
always walk in armor."*

— Margaret Fuller
Summer on the Lakes, 1844

I'm going to trust you enough to just tell you the story. Straight. Try to refrain from shouting out what you would have done or what I should have done because, honestly, that's a bit like offering a comb to a bald person . . . too little, too late. And because we all believe what the world believes about us, be kind.

I was heading home from a bridal shower in Manhattan on a Sunday afternoon, some weeks ago. Stopped for a light on 96th Street, I was searching for some music to take my mind off the unexpectedly heavy traffic when I was startled by rapping on my passenger-side window. There stood a distraught, totally tan, Harry Hamlin look-alike, dressed in a beautiful suit. I rolled down the window (I said no

judgments till I'm done!), and he explained, "Thank you so much for stopping. I'm mortified to be standing here panhandling in the middle of the city, but see that car?" he asked, pointing to a white Mercedes with its flashers on parked across the street. "That's mine. My name is Tim (he mentioned a last name which I promptly forgot); I'm a CPA on my way home to Sag Harbor and I've run out of gas." He shook his head. "The gas station won't take my credit card and I really need to get back. Can you help me?"

Now folks, I was talking to a really handsome guy in an expensive suit who drove a Mercedes. He was obviously humiliated. How could I just drive away? I pulled over to the curb before deciding what to do. Relieved, he continued, "I don't know how to thank you. The thought of having to beg. . . ." his voice trailed off. I reached for my pocketbook.

"Do you have a business card?" he asked. "I'll have my secretary send you a check first thing tomorrow morning. You don't know how much I appreciate this."

"I don't have a card," I said as I handed him a twenty-dollar bill. Tim bit his lip. "The can of gas is twenty-eight dollars, I'm sorry."

All I had was two more twenty-dollar bills. I hesitated as I handed over the second bill.

"Have you seen *The Producers*?" he suddenly asked. "I have four tickets for a week from Saturday night. My sister is getting married and I can't use them. It would be my pleasure to send them to you along with your money. You've been so kind." Then he took out a piece of paper from a really nice wallet and jotted down my name and phone number.

"That would be great but it's not necessary," I said, already planning which lucky couple would be sitting next to us that night. I inhaled, thinking nothing makes a person feel better than the sense of having done a really good deed.

Tim stood behind my car and stopped the traffic so I could re-enter my lane. We waved and I went on my way. The whole encounter took less than two minutes.

"Autumn Colors," by Rick Mundy of Setauket reflects "pick your own pumpkin" time on Long Island. You can see more of this artist's work on October 26 and 27 at Library Park, Main Street, Cold Spring Harbor or online at www.ArtLongIsland.com. To contact Rick Mundy Watercolors call 631-689-6298.



LI LIVING

...being taken

It took till the next light for me to wonder why I hadn't asked him for his business card. And a few feet more to mull over why a CPA couldn't find an ATM or gas station that would accept a credit card. But he was dressed so well and was so handsome . . . and he was a peer, right?

By 5 pm the next day, after enduring my husband's eye roll and lecture about opening the window all the way (I'd bet a million dollars he would have done the very same thing, especially if "Tim" was a beautiful young woman), I was forced to face the fact that maybe I'd been had. But

by whom? A talented con man or a self-centered accountant? At first I was humiliated, shamed to have been seen as such an easy mark. Then I was angry . . . how dare he take advantage of my random act of kindness. Then I was embarrassed, having to admit to myself that if he was missing a tooth or wasn't as cute, in short, if he had been someone who really needed the forty bucks, I never would have given it to him.

I wish I could say this was a valuable experience that has left me wiser. But it's hard to recover from what you don't fully understand. In life, when you learn a lesson, you suddenly

"get" something you've always understood, but in a different way. I can't say that what I did was against my better judgment because I believe you can only recognize the bad guys in retrospect. It's much easier to protect yourself from a thief than from a gifted liar. And if indeed it's true that good is mostly allied with vulnerability and evil with power, then I'd better get used to the fact that I'm doomed.

P.S. Tim from Sag Harbor; if you're reading this, I still haven't given up hope that maybe you just lost my number.

Marcia Byalick of Searingtown is a freelance writer.



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RUTT
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patience *makes perfect*

by Marcia Byalick

i swear I'm being tested. In the last two months I've stood on more long lines and waited hours for more delayed planes than is good for a person.

Three times out of three I've chosen the wrong lane on the Williamsburg Bridge, leaving me standing still watching the cars in the next lane whiz by. If I were paranoid, I'd say it

was a conspiracy. It's like someone sees me coming and makes sure the person in front of me in the supermarket has a fistful of coupons, five unscannable items and is paying with an out-of-town check.

All things come to those who wait, they say. Things like high blood pressure, foul language, white knuckles and curled toes, I say. My waiting is not calm; my waiting has teeth. The world of technology has made "instant" commonplace and lowered tolerance to dangerous levels. The task of waiting two hours and 27 minutes at Kennedy Airport a few weeks ago just about did me in. I learned once again that time becomes a mighty opponent when you deliberately seek to kill it. After thinking about it, I've come to humbly believe that patience, as a virtue, has been underrated and waiting, as a great art, unacknowledged.

My exasperation as the eleventh person on line at the Post Office on the day the new stamps came out was way out of whack. One would think from

"Early Morning Sunflowers for Ron," an oil painting by Bruce Lieberman, is part of a new exhibition at The Long Island Museum of American Art, History & Carriages entitled "Long Island: Morning, Noon & Night." The exhibition runs through September 16. Call 631-751-0066 for more information.



...patience

the stress my body was undergoing that I was in serious danger. Was the issue that I was wasting time? That I wasn't in control? I'm not sure. I seriously tried thinking of all the ways standing on that unbearably slow-moving line could have been worse. I was warm and safe and dry. I didn't have to go to the bathroom. I had no theater tickets. Just as you can't force a fruit to ripen, a flower to blossom or water to boil, I reasoned, you can't expect one overwhelmed, well-meaning civil servant to speed up. Just breathe and let go, I instructed myself. The lesson, that it takes a lot

of patience to have patience, is not easy to master.

What's sad is that for all the energy I've expended contriving ways to be less wasteful of precious, fleeting, irreplaceable time, I've never figured how to best invest my savings. The years have taught that "free" time evaporates if not immediately acknowledged. I wonder exactly where I lost my patience and whether this state I'm in is incurable. I envy my sister who has never worn a watch, my friend who blithely opens a book when faced with unexpected delays, my daughter who sticks her ever present Walkman

over her ears when she's in limbo.

I wasn't always this way. I remember, in the days before "shortcut" became my mantra and "time consuming" the worst thing a task could be, I coped pretty well with long waits at the gynecologist, the beauty salon and my favorite restaurant. The harried pace of life has forced them all to be more respectful of time. While waiting at the airport, I loved to people watch, imagining by how they walked if they were traveling for business or pleasure, returning home or striking out for uncharted lands. I didn't check movies and plays to see how long they were before I went to see them or tape shows to fast-forward through endless commercials. I used to think small children (Are we there yet?) were the most impatient among us. Now I'm not so sure.

The first commandment of any twelve-step program asks that we accept what we can't change. Maybe that's the key. That impatience is an addiction might actually be good news. It means with commitment and hard work it can be overcome. I'm tired of getting red-faced in the bank and restlessly toe tapping at the train station. I'm going to inhale deeply, keep a kit of pen, paper, magazines, sucking candy and CDs in my car and resolve to become more patient. Wish me luck. I no longer want to stupidly fast-forward myself into a future I'd no doubt trade for today.



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about Face

| By Marcia Byalick | Illustration by Tim Berry

I call it my new face; my husband calls it my old face. One daughter finds it remarkable that her mother, who looked in the mirror so infrequently three-foot hairs were known to grow out of her chin, decided to go through with it. The other daughter, while I think secretly believing the whole procedure a bit much, nonetheless applauded what she saw as a life-affirming experience.

Although I think Helen Mirren is stunning and I cringe when I see 60-year-olds sporting blank, unlined-in faces, beauty was suddenly too far from the eyes of this beholder when I brushed my teeth in the morning. Was it a brighter light that heightened my perception of my eyelids and chin and sun-damaged skin? What did I expect to look like anyway?


Luckily as we approach 2008, sagging jowls and wrinkles are the new gray hair and crooked teeth — easily fixable and optional

for those who can afford to smooth them out. My goal, honestly, was not to look younger (I know you don't believe me) but just to look good for my age. So I did my research, worked out a few entitlement issues, got over the fear that I'd look like a Bratz doll and took the plunge.

Using "conventional weapons with a different delivery system," Scott Wells, my wonderful, talented surgeon, patiently explained how he was going to war against skin laxity, gravitational descent and volume loss. He talked about fabric and tailoring, describing how he was going to shrink-wrap the texture of my face, changing it from linen to Lycra. He never mentioned anything plastic . . . instead he used words like "subtle" and "natural" and "refreshed." Instantly I knew he was my guy.

It's been three months. And while as anyone who watches *Nip/Tuck* knows, plastic surgery won't solve your problems, in my case it certainly makes looking at recent photographs a lot more pleasurable. It might take a while to recoup my investment but the money I'm saving on expensive foundations and concealers is a lovely perk. So is the time I'm not spending reading about, buying and applying them. Yet strange as it may sound, the best part of all is that, aside from the few people I told about the surgery, nobody noticed.

Not my neighbors . . . or the people at work . . . or the women at the gym. Not even my father. The owner of our favorite restaurant did compliment me on my outfit (a black sweater and jeans), and my manicurist did stare a second too long, then smiled. But my goal was achieved. If I didn't tell you, you would never know. I realize I was telling the truth when I said this surgery was all about me and it didn't matter if no one else saw a difference. All about me! I had to reach this age to finally learn that didn't mean selfish . . . or wasteful or vain.

I still wear my glasses, frustrating a friend who can't understand why I wouldn't finally get contacts and show off my hoodless eyelids. I refused to make my forehead silicone smooth with Botox, because it's a major area of emotional expressiveness on my face. And I'm done. The rest of my flaws, while not appealing, are comfortable and familiar. If only my daughter didn't greet my new/old face by saying, "You look great, Mom, but now you gotta whiten your teeth." 

You're The Best!



Praise with a purpose

| By Marcia Byalick | Illustration by Tim Berry

This week I think I might have over-flattered. I told a sick relative she looked terrific, a neighbor's four-year-old he was brilliant for sharing his pretzels with my granddaughter, a writer acquaintance her last essay was hilarious, and a friend struggling to master Italian that he's improved dramatically. I was sincere each time, if not totally honest. After all, toasts, introductions, obituaries and letters of recommendation are all carefully crafted to falsify and/or exaggerate the truth. And research shows that children who are told that their teacher thinks they're smart will do better on tests than they would have otherwise. To me, anything that boosts happiness is good, even if sometimes it calls for a tad of deception.

But recently praise with a darker purpose, designed with an expectation of a return, has taken center stage. Like a bribe, its ulterior motive is either to elicit a favor or simply stay in the good graces of the flatteree. It's like the woman sitting next to me on a spin bike who last week remarked that I looked like I'd lost some weight. Before a pleased smile even left my face, she continued on to ask if my husband could help her out with a personal problem. Ugh. Obviously an amateur at the brown-nose business, she hasn't quite gotten that flattery is language that advances self-interest while concealing it at the same time.

In this age of irony, carefully crafted praise is just another useful skill, a strategizing tool for playing the game. My daughter is a celebrity publicist and if you ask her what she does, she'll tell you she's paid to flatter. Movie stars, politicians, royalty . . . and probably your boss . . . are gifted with compliments way more than the rest of us. It amazes me how people of high self-esteem, intelligence and accomplishment so often see the compliments directed at them as shrewd judgment rather than ingratiating spin. A University of Nebraska study found that paying the right compliment is by far the most effective strategy for getting a higher-up to like you — and reward you with a raise. It proves the old adage that a rich man's joke is always funny.

At home it is our children who are showered with compliments daily. They can be premeditated, just not overdone. The downside of our effusiveness is documented by research blaming too much loving flattery for a decline in our kids' resilience and resourcefulness. For long-marrieds, sincere praise tends to be a rare and thrilling event. A poll in England found that one in eight women said they hadn't received a genuine compliment from their man in the past three months. We can't let the knack of a well-placed flattering word, not asked for or demanded, given freely and not coerced, become a dying art form.

Commendations are cheap, positive energy. I can't imagine teaching anyone anything without praise. Or winning over an intimidating presence without some flattery. Or supporting and encouraging a loved one without a compliment. I'll bet there's someone under your roof right now that's overdue a verbal reward. And as far as you're concerned, my intelligent, sensitive, generous reader, I appreciate these few minutes you spend with me more every single month. 🍷



woman in the Middle

| By Marcia Byalick | Illustration by Tim Berry

Forgive me for whining. Today finds me a super-stretched, trapped-in-the-middle, poster child for the sandwich generation. Where once I reveled in my super powers as selfless nurturer, now I realize all my love and devotion is not enough to control or cure or even alleviate the burdens carried by the generations before and after me. For this Mother's Day, I want just one thing — to feel neither worried nor guilty for one whole day.

Don't misunderstand, I love in painful amounts the people at either end of this tug-of-war. It's the crushing responsibility of simultaneously managing them all that's draining me. My 90-year-old father has developed dementia. His wife has emphysema and macular degeneration. Arranging care for them has me flying back and forth to Florida, lately on a few hours notice. My mother-in-law has been hospitalized three times in the last four

months. Cellulitis, pneumonia, congestive heart failure . . . the litany of medical emergencies is familiar to anyone with aging parents.

One daughter left a super-successful career (in her parents' eyes at least) to pursue her passion . . . stand-up comedy.

There is no more excruciating location for a mother than a seat in the audience at a comedy club where her baby tries to make drunken strangers laugh.

Her sister who lives in New Jersey is pregnant with her second child. Soon I'll be babysitting for two of the most beautiful children in the world twice a week when she returns to work.

I feel like an amateur, unprepared for the physical and mental challenges of this stage. I don't remember my parents worrying that they didn't do enough, didn't sacrifice enough for my grandparents. It was a time when chronic situations inevitably led to the end-of-life expectancy, not the disabling conditions that today can last for years. Most of my friends have arranged extended-care insurance policies and prepared legal papers so that our more healthily selfish kids won't be forced to deal with the kinds of issues we're struggling with.

Although parents have always taken care of children and children then have been expected to take care of parents, shifting demographics and a revolution in child-rearing practices have altered the cycle. From the moment I married at twenty, my mother and father never heard about any real problems, personal or financial, that I might have had. My silence protected us both. Baby boomers fostered a more intense bond with our children. Now the connection I share with my daughters allows for the whole truth and nothing but — honest, fulfilling . . . and exhausting.

In 2006 "the sandwich generation" made its way into the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. With older Americans becoming the fastest growing segment of the population, with almost 10 million people providing long-distance care for parents, and nearly two-thirds of those under 60 thinking they will have elder-care responsibilities in the next decade, we're all bound to sometimes feel like we aren't meeting anyone's needs, especially not our own.

Most of us will work harder to do the right thing by our families than either our parents did or our children will. After years of hearing how fortunate we baby boomers are, maybe this is an unexplored dark side. So on the days I feel hard and mean and overwhelmed, I will remember that who I am and what I'm worth is all about family. Through it all, am I blessed? Absolutely.

Happy Mother's Day. 🌸



Guilty as charged

| By Marcia Byalick | Illustration by Tim Berry

What do cinnamon buns at the mall, the Game Show Network and Harold Robbins novels have in common? What about eating cold Chinese food for breakfast, spending a hundred dollars on two pair of underwear or humming along to Milli Vanilli? Not to mention needing a daily dose of Judge Judy . . . or computer bridge . . . or John Edwards. Ah, there's something to be said for an occasional dash of depravity. Is your pleasure crossing the line? Eating saturated fat? Splurging on something ridiculous? Join the crowd.

Guilty pleasures. The dictionary states they are "substances or activities a person enjoys and often practices while believing the substance or activity is abnormal, improper or incorrect." It's the kind of behavior we hesitate to admit — the list of secret likes we prefer to keep to ourselves. Instinctively, we understand our neighbors don't have to know about how happy it makes us to

use a coffee filter three times or how we sometimes choose a longer line at the supermarket to allow enough time to peruse *The Star*. If they did know, they might judge us as lowbrow or unintelligent or worst of all, uncool.

These are things we shouldn't like but, ohmigod, do we. Like bacon. Or those songs we wouldn't dare pop into the CD player if anyone else was around. That's because music isn't just about what we like, it's about where we're from, how old we are, what political leanings we have. When others see us enjoying a song that doesn't match our self image, it makes us squirm. I turn to mush when I hear, "I'll Know," a song about love at first sight from *Guys and Dolls* or "Some Enchanted Evening" from *South Pacific*. My cutting-edge 2008 persona is very clear. It says, "You're not supposed to like Karen Carpenter." Or Neil Diamond or Wham or Paula Abdul, Huey Lewis and the News or, dare I say it, Michael Jackson (who because of his freakish looks and erratic, not to say criminal, behavior, I listen to only when I'm alone).

A recent study reported that for the past four decades, Pop Tarts (40 percent of which are consumed by adults), are among America's most entrenched waist-threatening guilty pleasures. Luckily, I outgrew that one some years back. My latest humiliating favorite is having a hot dog at Costco. Or chewing as many pieces of Bazooka bubble gum as are under my roof at any given time. I don't include my addiction to Mallomars since I do survive the seasons they are not available for purchase.

I've come to understand that how guilty I feel after indulging in any of the above always depends on how snobby my environment is at the moment. I felt a cold rush to judgment recently when I mentioned to my friend, a docent at a prominent Manhattan art museum, that I was going out to Stony Brook to catch the Norman Rockwell exhibit. It brought to mind how I used to love reading Harold Robbins and Leon Uris — before I learned they weren't "nutritious" enough and I should spend my time with Nabokov and Günter Grass. While I enjoyed my experience with these master storytellers, adding their more prestigious names to my library did not either cure cancer or improve my mortality.

While I'm coming clean you might as well know I love challenging the speed limit, TiVo-ing *Project Runway*, following my horoscope and reading Page Six. When I grow up, I hope to make additions to the list like sleeping later on Sundays, reading *Vanity Fair* the day it arrives and buying the buttered popcorn at the movies. As long as I'm in my anti-self-improvement mode, I'll just have to learn how to accept being guilty as charged. 🍿



Aboard the New Friend Ship

| By Marcia Byalick | Illustration by Tim Berry

I was the dumbest one in my computer class years ago . . . despite the fact that more than half the students spoke English as a second language. It still takes me twice as long as it should to input my work on a corporate website, keeping me on intimate terms with Mahesh, the company's troubleshooter. I'm struggling to catch up, finally uploading photos, shopping online, IMing a few friends through the workday, even setting up a folder to remember my dozen passwords. But after referring to the explosion in social software first as My Face, then as Space Book, my mortified daughter decided it was time to introduce me to the intriguing phenomenon known as social networking.

In this new drenched-in-technology world where everything is multi-screens, channels, conversations, tasking — it's no wonder social expectations have changed. In just a few years, Facebook has leaked out of the college dormitory like some rare tropical

disease to infect over 80 million subscribers and encourage them to share their thoughts about the latest episode of *Mad Men* with hundreds of near-strangers. It's a place where you spend lots of time communicating not necessarily with those whom you know, but with whom you sort of know. No less a social butterfly than Bill Gates posted a profile . . . then had to drop out after getting 8,000 requests a day to be his friend.

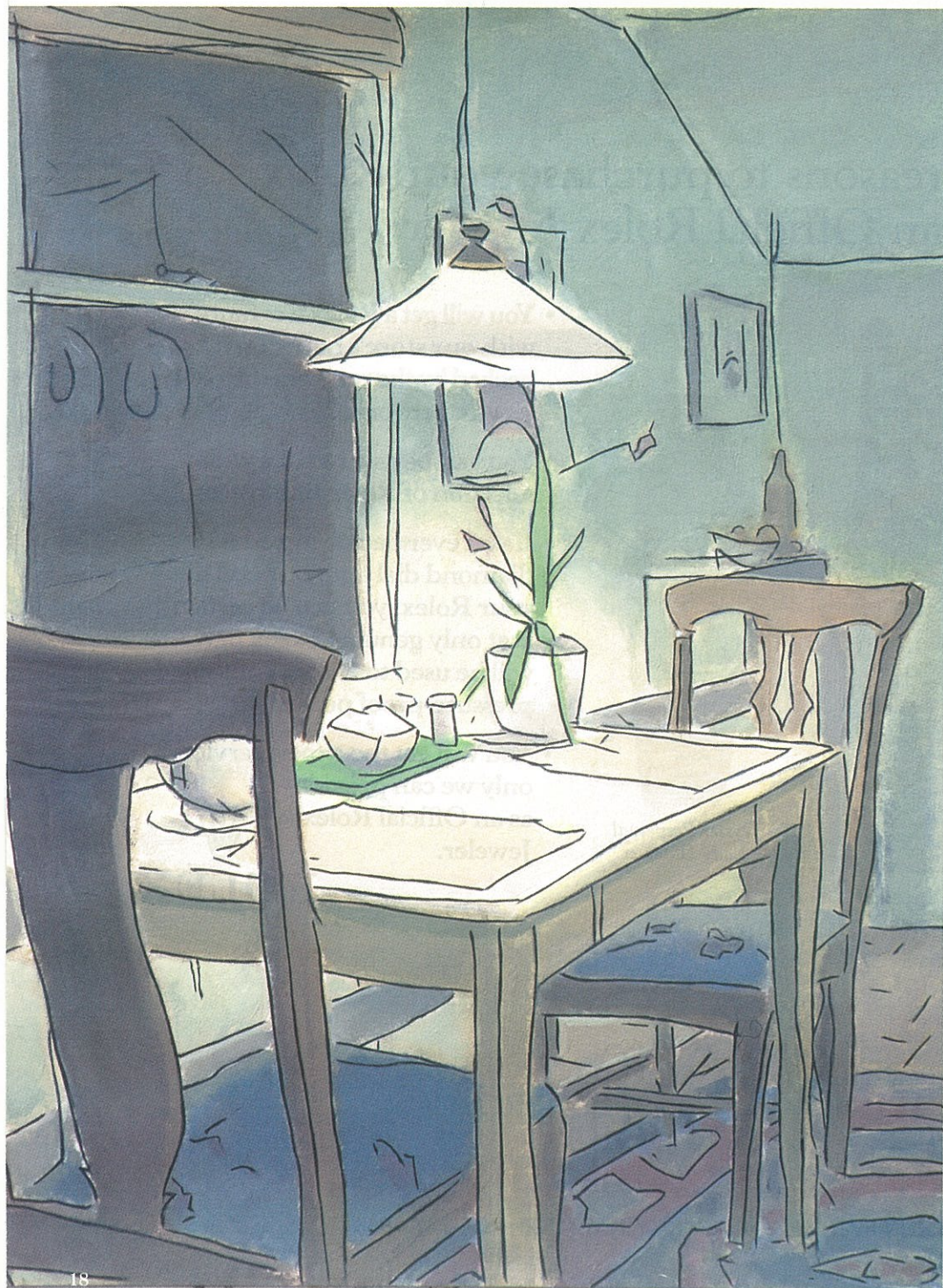
My daughter uses Facebook to connect with new friends, old friends, old, old friends and their friends, all way too busy (and not quite invested enough) to make contact the old-fashioned way. Peering over her shoulder recently as the number of her "friends" crawled towards 600, I was fascinated by those who update several times in 24 hours, letting the world know how they are feeling from minute to minute, checking to make sure no important announcement, party invite or funny video escapes their view. They nurture their profile as though it's alive, proudly feeding and grooming it regularly. I was as impressed with how clever so many of the updates were as I was charmed by snapshots of their latest vacation, adorable pets and beautiful children.

What troubles me is that users seem unaware these sites often lead people to say or do things that come back to haunt them. Although there are no statistics on how many times silly pages of half-naked and drunk college students have prevented them from being hired, 40 percent of employers say they'd consider Facebook profiles when screening potential employees. A weatherman in Virginia got canned for posting nude shots of himself stepping out of the shower. A former mayor in Oregon lost her job after posing in her underwear for her profile. Detectives and prosecutors have used what's posted to solve crimes and cast doubt on a defendant's character during sentencing hearings. And cruelest of all, my daughter knows someone who found out her boyfriend broke up with her when he changed his Facebook status update.

For all its shortcomings, I see Facebook as a visually rich tapestry on which to tell your story and spark conversation. Even if you have no desire to have coffee with that strange girl who wore Adam Ant makeup all through high school, it's kind of cool to see she is a social worker with three kids who lives in Hawaii . . . while having her learn what an oh-so-popular and successful almost-adult you've grown up to be. 🖥️

stretching the chains

by Marcia Byalick



my roots have always entwined themselves around home. Home meant permanence, the place you return to to separate from the world. It's where the heart is . . . along with 20-year-old pots and pans, two rooms that need painting and a bottom drawer full of old photo albums. Home is where your family sleeps, your bills arrive, where your wok, juicer and Cuisinart lie unused. In a larger sense, home can encompass a neighborhood, a community, even a city. Simply put, home is where you know your way around.

In today's world, however, home has become a place you have to leave to find yourself, to unearth the true nature buried under the personality your family has assigned to you. Not one to fall behind the times, I agreed with those who said that the best mother is not the one who is leaned upon, but the one who makes leaning unnecessary. The better you do your job, I'd

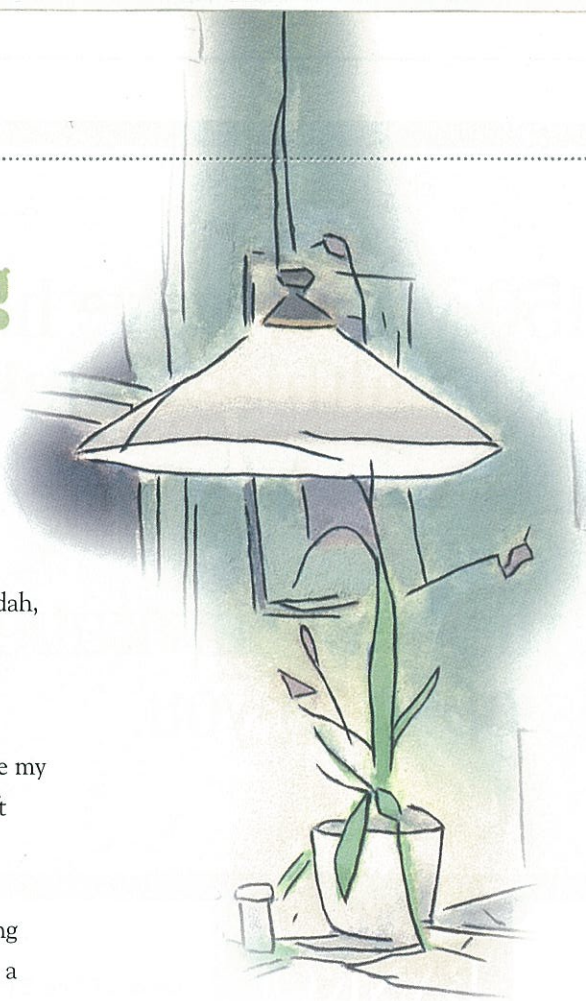
"Interior," a 14"x11" oil on paper, is by Nick Maravell of Greenlawn. The artist's work can be seen at O.K. Harris Gallery Works of Fine Art in New York City.

...stretching

preach, the less you're needed. What greater gift can you give a child than to allow her to make her own way, sturdily, completely, on her own two feet? Yaddah, yaddah, confidence . . . yaddah, yaddah, self-esteem. But that was a few months ago, before I became a victim of my own success, before my 23-year-old daughter up and left home for an incredible job opportunity in Los Angeles.

Since then I've been walking around feeling selfless, like I did a courageous thing by "letting" her go and relinquishing all claims to peace of mind. Before she boarded the plane, I tried to stuff her head with a few months worth of admonitions and her wallet with the couple of "God forbid" numbers I'd culled from friends and neighbors. But I have to admit I came up short in the advice department. I never left home. For the first time, my youngest child was going where I have never been, embarking on an adventure I would never have had the guts to explore.

Whenever my friends and I talk about the differences between Generation X and Generation Carol King, we speak as if, because we were married and mothers at their age, we were somehow smarter or stronger. What we were, I believe, is more satisfied, more comfortable . . . and more fearful. Today's daughters will not be content settling for a life of



"contingent value," as the feminists call it, and will travel as far as they have to for the "intrinsic value" they seek — even if it's 3000 miles away from home.

To be honest, I'm less concerned with worrying about Carrie, than I am with how someone like me is going to function effectively if my baby is living in California. What's clear to me now is that all the years I cared about her, I was nurturing my own self-esteem. No other job ever made me as proud or as scared, or filled me with such heart-thumping delight and bone-tired weariness. This was an eternal commitment, my serving as her bridge over troubled water, and I accepted the challenge. Then, to paraphrase Long Islander Christopher Morley, I had bad luck with my kids — they all grew up.

As a woman who has worked

hard to achieve some semblance of healthy balance between career and home, I've always known the pitfalls of making children the center of life and your reason for being. But knowing something doesn't preclude your gut from feeling something else entirely. Raised by the generation of women before me, it's not easy to shake off the notion that children come first. A mother who is not sacrificing money or leisure or the last bite of her ice cream cone for her kids was simply not a Phi Beta Kappa mom. And, the reasoning followed, if you did your job well, how could your offspring, the unique and awesome collection of your gifts and errors, ever bear to leave?

Reconciled to the fact that I can't keep Carrie here by letting the air out of her tires, I'm now into picturing her as a galaxy spinning away, but still within my pull of gravity. Strong families are stubborn; distance might stretch the ties that bind them but they won't break. As I admire her business cards and listen to stories about Michael Douglas and George Clooney, Courtney Cox and Sharon Stone, I'm grateful that I didn't always know this day would come. I just have to make sure she knows that Thomas Wolfe was wrong . . . she most certainly can come back home again.



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