

JAJance 2010 Blogs

Un-Deck the Halls

Saturday, January 2, 2010

As I write this, the decorations are coming down. The elves that held the stockings with care on the mantelpiece are still there, but the stockings have disappeared. Our collection of Santa Clauses and angels are having a convention of sorts on the dining room table prior to disappearing into their allotted boxes. The three angels in the alcove above the television set are still there. The only way to get them down is to use a ladder. Baby Jesus is still in His little manger, but the box for that is standing there waiting to collect the creche figurines..

The trees are still up, but the lights are out. It's the end of a season. And I've loved every minute of it right up until this week when I was laid low by some kind of sinus infection bug.

The Grandma Snow Plow effect worked like a charm on the Pacific Northwest weather patterns. We had very little now, at least we didn't here in Bellevue where we didn't have enough snow to merit the use of a plow. And the generator did its wind storm prevention bit by being ready to work and not being needed. In other words, some wind, but no real wind. Rain, yes, but I'm happy with rain.

What did Santa bring me? A golf bag which I expect to use in Arizona once we get there, and a television remote that I can actually use. It's one that was smart enough to connect to ALL our electronic devices and make them work. Even I can make them work! This is astonishing progress. The other SIX!!! remotes have all been banished to a family room cabinet. Out of sight and out of mind.

But what we really did this Christmas is spend time with kids and grandkids. Having the older girls here for a week was fun, and having the younger kids around for the holidays is. . . well . . . it's what the holidays are all about. I was washing dishes after Christmas dinner when Colty brought me his plate. Most of the food was gone. The broccoli was NOT gone. "I don't like broccoli," he said as he handed it to me. And, since I'm G rather than Mommy, I was able to say with a clear conscience, "That's fine." Grandma's house; Grandma's rules.

We still have some of Granrud's Lefse lurking in the freezer in the garage. I had thought we'd have company today, but the daughters have put me in a grandchild time-out. They don't want me giving my particular bug to the little ones, and I don't blame them.

I've spent the last few quiet days gradually working my stuffed head back into next year's (OOPS! THIS YEAR's) Ali Reynolds book. The story got dropped on its head before Thanksgiving and has been eluding me since then.

This morning someone wrote to me and said their family tradition is to spend the first weekend of the year reflecting on the people who had made a difference in their lives. She wrote to tell me how much she had enjoyed hearing me speak in Allentown, PA. She went on to say that reading my book of poetry, *After the Fire*, which told the tale of the end of my marriage, had become far more than a book to her when her own marriage ended. She wrote to let me know and she also wrote to tell me thank you.

So I'm taking a page from her book. It's clear to me that there are a lot of people involved in my writing enterprise--the people who work for my publishers, the booksellers, and the people who read the books and the blogs--make a difference in my life. I'm reflecting on all those folks right now.

Thank you, and Happy New Year.

Number Please!

Saturday, January 9, 2010

I am a woman of a certain age. I remember when our family first had phone service in Bisbee. The telephone was a big black piece of plastic equipment that must have weighed a good five pounds. It also had no dial. When you picked up the phone a disembodied female voice said, "Number please." That telephone operator was a fount of knowledge. She knew what time it was. She knew if the person you wanted to reach was on the phone already or wasn't home. Our telephone number at that point was simple--853-W. That was it.

Sometime in the Fifties, Dial-tone came to town and the black five pound dial free phone was replaced by another black five pound object--this one with a dial. My husband, a retired electronics engineer, told me, "That's right. That's when the central office in Bisbee got a Strowger Switch?" Excuse me, a what????

It turns out that Almon B. Strowger ran a mortuary--a money losing mortuary--in Kansas City in the early part of the last century. The reason his business was floundering was due in part to the fact that one of those pesky "number, please" operators was the wife of his major competitor. In those pre-Yellow Pages days, the interfering operator was sending enough business in her husband's direction that Mr. Strowger's business was going down for the count. Deciding there had to be a better way to by-pass busy-body operators, he invented a mechanical switch system that allowed for dialing has been known as the Strowger Switch ever since. He sold the patent to a pre-cursor of MaBell and the rest is history.

I believe the switching system came to Bisbee's central office late in the game, and I also believe Bisbee's was one of the last central offices to stop using it. But I digress. (That's what blogs do, they allow for digressions. There are no rules against digression, so get over it!)

Once Dial-tone arrived in Bisbee, our phone number went from 853-W to HEmlock 2-3858. Or as we said later--432-3858. Or as we said even later 602-432-3858. Now they've changed the area code again, but who's counting? Bisbee was such a small town back in those days that the HEmlock part went by the way. We only needed to dial the 2-and then the rest of the number. My best friend's number was 2-3688. And the number for the radio station, KSUN, was 2-3777.

You're probably rolling your eyes by now and thinking, how can she possibly remember that? Every morning at 8:45, right while we were eating breakfast, there was a five minute radio program called Whiz Quiz. The announcer would read a question and the first caller to answer it correctly would win two passes to the movie theaters in town. Neither of my parents ever made an appearance on Jeopardy, but they could have. So as soon as the announcer started asking the question, I would go to the phone in the living room and dial all the numbers but holding the last 7 until my parents either came up with the right answer or didn't. They usually did. I would let the dial go and VOILA!! I was the first caller, You could only win once a month--and we did. My parents knew a lot of stuff. It wasn't until after I married Bill that I learned that by dialing those first four numbers, I automatically precluded anyone else from getting through Thank you, Mr. Strowger. You made it possible for me to see Audie Murphy in To Hell and Back, and Lucy and Desi in the The Long, Long Trailer. I had no idea.

But what does any of that have to do with anything? When Mr. Strowger was busy inventing his mechanical switch, I'm sure he never imagined the proliferation of phones or the totally electronic switching systems that exist in our lives now. The phones themselves are tiny. They're powerful They can take pictures. They can take videos. They can wake you up in the morning. They can tell you when you're lost and give you walking or driving directions. Amazing!

Now that we have so many phones in our lives, my number remembering application has gone awry. We have a landline phone in this house, but I have no idea what the number is. The only people who do know the number are the local political action committees and the local charities. When that phone rings, I don't even answer it. I know it's not for me.

You know how they say about some things, if you don't use it, you lose it? Well, that's true for my land line phone number. Unfortunately, it's also true for other phone numbers as well. My husband is permanently offended that if I need to write down his cell phone number, I'll probably have to look it up on my own cell phone's directory. Why should I remember his number or my sons' or daughters' numbers when my PHONE remembers them all? (Actually, I have now learned Bill's cell phone number but there are times when his social security number totally escapes me.)

Why is that? Why would that be? I think I know. My random access memory is so full of that old 853-W stuff that there's no room for new stuff. I guess I need to reboot. And go get another cup of coffee.

It's a Tall Country!

Friday, January 15, 2010

Bill and I have been driving back and forth between Seattle and Tucson together for twenty-four years, verging on twenty-five. When I told a one-time editor that it was a twenty-six hour drive her response was, "I didn't know we had such a tall country."

Yes, it is a tall country. We do the drive in three reasonably tough days. Citizens of this country are divided into two separate but relatively equal halves, and I'm not talking Democrat and Republicans, although, come to think of it, that's true, too. I'm talking about those two warring camps, the people who go to Burger King and the people who go to McDonalds. (Yes, I know there are Vegans in this world who probably wouldn't be caught stepping into either establishment. I think of them as the Independents).

We're Burger King types. A road trip isn't a road trip without a Whopper Junior here and there along the way--a Whopper Junior each, two senior coffees, and a value meal set of fries to share. What we've seen along the way is a lot of other people doing the same thing. Somewhere in Northern California we saw a group of men in their seventies and eighties who had pretty much taken possession of that whole front set of booths, just on the far side of the order line. I suspect that they were veterans, probably of the Korean Conflict, judging by their ages, who evidently come there every day to hang out and talk over the news of the world. They were having fun right along with their Whopper Junior lunches.

We saw another similar group of pals having breakfast and pot after pot of coffee in the hotel in Bakersfield. No women were included in either group, and I'm glad there are still places where it's okay for guys to be guys and girls to be girls. I have no doubt that the wives involved were off doing their own kind of distaff mischief.

Coming through Oregon we spent a good fifteen miles driving beside a long funeral procession on I-5, traveling between Eugene and Roseburg. There must have been thirty vehicles in that procession and probably eighty motorcycles. On the last vehicle in the procession was a sign that said they were honoring a fallen soldier. I don't know his name, but have an idea that it was a young man who gave his life in service to his country in Afghanistan or Iraq. The motorcycles were all flying American flags. I'm sure the guys--and a few gals--on those motorcycles were veterans, too. From their ages, I'd say they were most likely from the Vietnam War era, but they were there doing their part. They reminded me of the grizzled old guys who came to my son-in-law's funeral to honor him with a twenty-one gun salute. They didn't know Jon, but they were there for him, and I suspect the same is true for the guys on the motorcycles.

I'll probably revisit our trip down in the next few blog updates, but for right now, I have to say thank you to the men and women in uniform who continue to make this tall country the land of the free and the home of the brave.

It's A Tall Country #2

Saturday, January 23, 2010

In our drives up and down I-5 for the past twenty-four years, Bill and I have created a string of memories that bubble along from one state line to another. We're like the people in that old joke where, instead of saying the joke, you just say the number and everyone gets it and laughs anyway. In our case it's places rather than numbers.

Where to start? There's the Falls restaurant in Olympia where I bought my first laptop from a real estate appraiser who, in 1989, thought he needed a pickup truck more than he needed a computer to impress his mostly rural clientele. Then there's the Country Cousin in Centralia. During the floods a couple of years ago, I worried that the restaurant along with all its accompanying knick-knacks would have come to grief. Imagine our relief when we drove south a few weeks later and found their mouth-watering chicken was and still is safely available.

We've driven the road in summer and winter, in all kinds of weather. There was the BMW that went roaring past us in the left hand lane in the middle of a snowstorm just north of Vancouver. After passing us, it veered onto the right shoulder. Instead of taking his lumps and stopping, the male driver goosed the accelerator and tried to make it back up onto the highway only to come to a very sudden and solid stop against a bridge abutment. Did we stop and help him? No, he had already endangered us with his reckless passing. We called and reported it, however. And we did the same thing to a northbound snow-non-driver just outside Salem. That guy went off the road and plowed into someone's wooden backyard fence. By the way, those calls were made on our old brick shaped Motorola telephone. Remember those?

There was the Portland ice storm--our particular Portland ice storm. We were driving south with our dogs, Aggie and Daphne. It was three days after the storm and we figured getting through Portland wouldn't be a problem, but it was. We ended up staying at River Place where our dogs were the first dogs to play in the three day old snow in the park next door and where Ag and Daph were welcomed into the part of the hotel where dogs aren't usually allowed to stay.

North of Ashland there's a farmhouse along the freeway where, as we were driving by, three horses let themselves out onto the highway. We called that one in as well, and I have to trust that the horses came through unscathed.

We never drive past Mount Shasta without thinking about the blizzard we drove through there. We made it into Eugene that night. It was New Year's Eve. The local people who were supposed to come to the New Year's Eve Bash couldn't make it out of their driveways, so we welcomed in the New Year with some of our fellow long distance travelers. But, in contrast, we were also in Eugene one hot summer day when it was 104 degrees.

Speaking of Mount Shasta reminds me of the one golf game we played at Mount Shasta Resort where, while we were trying to chip onto the second green, a big black bear--a bear bigger than our golf cart and closer to us than our golf cart--made a brief appearance on the third tee box. Considering what he was doing there, we have since always referred to that as the Turd Tee Box. And once he was finished, without benefit of any TP, he took several steps toward us. We were standing there clutching our putters. I'm sure our eyes were huge. After those fearful steps, he shrugged his massive shoulders, turned around and disappeared into a gully. You should have seen our next drives!!!

Redding. What can I say about Redding? Well, for one thing, there's the old Americana Motel where, as newlyweds with two kids stowed in a room next door, we actually set the mattress on fire. No, not that way!!! Bill turned on the bedside lamp. The cord had been worn through by the bed frame immediately shorted out and sent a plasma of flame out of the wall and into the mattress. While Bill put out the fire, I tried calling the office, but the desk clerk was out in the parking lot having a soda and a smoke. When I told him our mattress was on fire, he couldn't believe it. He followed me back to the room and when he saw the smoking outlet, he threw the remains of his soda at it which immediately reignited the flame. The scary part of all this is that the electrical system was such that the lights NEVER WENT OUT. Needless to say, we haven't stayed there since, and we usually pull the mattress out in every hotel room to check what's going on behind the frame.

And then there's the other time we pulled into Redding. We had a hotel reservation at the dreaded Red Lion but could we get there? No. Not for a couple of hours because there was a motorcycle rally with hundreds of motorcycle riders circling around and around.

Okay, next up would be Red Bluff. What do we remember about Red Bluff? That would be the drug take down Denny's. On our way in the door, Bill commented on the bum leaning against the wall with his dog and brand new work boots. Something didn't seem right. It was amazing to see the whole thing unfold right there in front of our eyes. Uniformed cops, undercover cops, bad guys dragged out of the place in handcuffs. You could pretty well call it the full meal deal, as it were.

Fog near Fresno. Snow on the Grapevine. And then, there's always Lebec. What's so funny about Lebec? Once again we were being snowbirds, heading south for the winter, loaded for bear in a Ford minivan with our dogs and six months worth of luggage, etc. In order to have extra packing room, we had removed the minivan's far back seat and left that in Tucson when we drove north. Suddenly, just as we started up the grade from the San Joaquin Valley, the car gave a little lurch and a shudder. Half a mile later, we pulled off on a short ramp that said Lebec. It's so small that the Triple A towing folks had a tough time figuring out where we were. They finally did, though, and we were towed for seventy-heart stopping miles by a crazed tow truck driver. Bill and I rode in the tow truck with him. Aggie and Daphne sat in the front seat of the minivan by themselves. It's the closest they ever came to driving a car. The tow truck deposited us

and the smoking remains of the minivan off at the nearest Ford dealer where, a mere six hours later, we finally managed to drive away in a brand a new minivan that we've always referred to as our Ford Fiasco. Oh, and guess what. We had to leave the back seat with the dealer, drive to Tucson, unload, pick up the OTHER back seat, and then drive back to make the exchange. Yes, the word Lebec is definitely good for a belly laugh.

There's the time we came through Palm Springs in the dead of summer. It was 126 degrees and the hotel AC could only make 30 degrees of headway against the heat. We had to go into the swimming pool and hope we'd fall asleep before we dried off. And then there was the time, again with the dogs, when our alternator gave out in Palm Springs. Aggie, Daphne, and I sat in the shade beside a hotel pool while Bill took care of getting the alternator replaced.

Dodging from I-5 to I-10 through Pasadena is a lot less stressful with the GPS guiding us than in the old days when I was reading the map. There's the case of food poisoning in Needles. The dust storm between Casa Grande and Tucson. The Burger King outside Palm Springs where there were dozens of customers waiting for orders while the people in the kitchen duked it out in some kind of battle.

Many trips. Many adventures. And lots of laughter because if you don't laugh you have to cry, and laughing is always better.

See you on the road.

Remembering Marilyn

Saturday, January 30, 2010



I've spent this week in Tucson, glued to my chair and gradually bringing the next Ali Reynolds book to order. It's been raining off and on most of the week, more like Seattle weather and not at all the kind of bright blue Arizona skies that snowbirds are looking for when they fly south for the winter.

When I'm writing it's easy to work barefoot and in my robe and jammies. Today, though, rain or shine, I'll be washing and ironing my hair and

putting on dress-up clothing, makeup, and shoes to attend a memorial service for a friend/fan here in Tucson, Marilyn Varming, who lost her battle with cancer earlier this month. Yesterday, someone sent me an e-mail asking if I would write something for Marilyn's memorial service. I did so, but this morning, realizing that it was time for me to write a blog update, I also remembered that I mentioned something about Marilyn and some of her long-distance pals in an earlier blog posting. It seemed to me that my readers might be interested in knowing what Paul Harvey would have called "the rest of the story."

Here it is:

Almost four years ago, my son-in-law, Jon Jance, was in Seattle's University Hospital and losing a nine year battle with malignant melanoma. Jon was a member of the U.S. Coast Guard. Someone with connections to both the Seattle Seahawks and the Coast Guard made arrangements for Seahawk Quarterback, Matt Hasselbeck, to come to the hospital to see him. It was supposed to be a thirty-minute, photo op visit. Instead, Matt came to Jon's room bringing an autographed football and autographed cleats and stayed for two hours. He and Jon talked about sports, but they also talked about life and about faith in a conversation sprinkled with plenty of laughter. There were photos, of course--pictures with Jon and his six month old baby, Colt, and pictures with Jon and our daughter, Jeanne T. as well. That visit was a wonderfully bright spot, a high point, in an otherwise very grim time for both Jon and for our daughter. A few months later, Jon was gone.

A year after that, Jeanne T. and Colt were at the Fort Lewis PX where Matt Hasselbeck and another Seahawk player were doing personal appearances and signing autographs. Wanting to tell Matt thank you for that very meaningful visit, Jeanne T. got in line with Colt, then almost two, planted on her hip. The handlers told people waiting in line that this was a "photo op only--no long conversations." When Jeanne T. reached the head of the line, she said, "I don't know if you remember me, but. . ." Matt interrupted her. "Of course, I remember you," he said. "And just look how much your baby has grown!"

Talk about not phoning it in!

A few months later I was here in Tucson, doing an appearance and signing at the Broadway Barnes and Noble. One of the people there was Mike LaPage, the manager of the Marriott Residence Inn at Williams Center. Mike told me that one of the people staying at his hotel was a huge fan of mine and that she had been looking forward to coming to see me. Unfortunately, that very morning she had received some devastating news--her cancer diagnosis--and simply couldn't summon the strength to come to the store. With Matt Hasselbeck's inspiration to guide me, I asked, "Do you think she would mind if I came to see her and signed her book?" Mike was thrilled at the prospect, and that's what we did.

That's how Marilyn Varming and I met--I went to her cheery apartment at Residence Inn and knocked on her door. I signed her books--all of them--and we talked for the better part of an hour. From then on, when I was in town on tour and she was well enough, she came to see me. When she wasn't well enough and as time allowed, I went to see her. I put her in touch with another fan of mine, Patty Patton, in Montana. Patty is dealing with her own devastating health issue--ALS--but the two of them became fast friends, bucking each other up and giving mutual encouragement. The assistant manager of the Barnes and Noble Store, Dena Roy, also became Marilyn's friend, as did another Residence Inn customer, Katarina Mullo, who met Marilyn when she and her husband were visiting in Tucson from Sweden.

And that's how four very far-flung friends met up with Marilyn Varming. I think I can speak for all four of us when I say we were inspired by Marilyn's charm and grace and humor in the face of adversity. None of us will forget the tattoos she put on her bald head in celebration of any and all holidays. I am honored to have been included in Marilyn's circle of acquaintance, and I think I can speak for all of us when I say how much I appreciate Julia Mcgaugh of the Residence Inn who went beyond the call of duty in keeping all of us informed as Marilyn's time grew short.

For Marilyn, Residence Inn wasn't just a home away from home; it was HOME! And it's the people who work there who made that happen. Thank you.

Another thank you is also due to Matt Hasselbeck. I know Marilyn never met him--she might not even have known who he is--but he made a difference in my life and in Marilyn's, too.

Oh, and because of my friendship with Marilyn and Patty, I've agreed to be the speaker at the first ALS Foundation Fundraising Luncheon at the Westin in Seattle on March 5th of this year. In other words, Matt Hasselbeck's gift to our family is one that keeps on giving.

The Round Robin Letter

Thursday, February 4, 2010

People who read my books know that my mother played a major part in my development, and I think my sisters and brothers are of a like mind. Evie Busk was a remarkable woman with the heart of a Marine drill instructor lurking behind a the pleasant facade of a 1950s house dress and apron. When we moved from South Dakota in the late forties, we moved my mother away from her family of four sisters and one brother. For years my mother corresponded with her siblings via the "Round Robin," an envelope that came our way usually once a month or so with a hand-written letter from each of our mother's sisters and their sister-in-law. My mother would take her last entry out, pen a new one, and send the envelope on its way. As far as I know, my mother's brother, our Uncle Glenn, never participated in this endeavor that kept the sisters in touch with one another across great distances and through the decades.

This week something similar happened. My brothers and sisters and I had an e-mail round robin discussion about the long road trips we took with our parents--ones where we had to split Dairy Queen milkshakes and where every meal included at least one shredded beef sandwich which our mother made out of homemade yeast rolls and boiled shredded beef. I believe the group was pretty evenly divided between the ones who "hated" the sandwiches and the ones who "loved" them. And all of us remember the far-reaching fly swatter our mother kept beside her in the front seat and used to enforce order in the back seat whenever the occasion required it.

But what that little e-mail experience did, aside from reminding me of how the Round Robin worked in the "old" days, was to remind me yet again of my mother. She was someone who had firm opinions about a whole lot of things and, believe me, she didn't suffer fools lightly. Yes, there are hints of my mother in all the mothers in my books--Joanna Brady's mother, J. P. Beaumont's mother, and Ali Reynolds's mother as well.

Evie Busk never went to school beyond the seventh grade, but she never made a grammatical error in speaking or in writing. Her subjects and predicates ALWAYS agreed, and her verb tenses were spot on. She taught her children to love reading by reading to us. She encouraged us to do well in school. She made sure we did our homework.

Somewhere in her eighties, our mother lost her interior editor. She decided that she had reached a point where she was going to say what she meant without "shillyshallying around the bush." And she did.

One of the times she attended a family reunion in South Dakota, she came home more than offended. It seems that when it was time to serve lunch, someone in MY generation decided that the kids should get in line to eat first. Believe me, my mother wasn't having any of THAT!! As she told me, "When I was a kid, we kids had to wait until the grownups filled their plates before we could fill ours, and I'm not going to the back of the line now." Not only did she go to the head of the line, she took herself out of the round robin circle, too.

As our mother got older she had several sets of JCPenney sets of pants, mostly in shades of purple, that came with wildly colorful floral print blouses. The pants were made of some kind of indestructible material, and they wore like iron--not unlike my father's bright blue K-Mart leisure suit which made it unscathed through at least three decades. Our mother wore those many sets of purple pants until she didn't need purple pants anymore.

Now I know why and I'm suddenly in the same boat in the clothing department.

I am six feet tall. I've been six feet tall since seventh grade. I spent my high school days wearing pants from JCPenneys that barely came to my ankles, "high water pants," as my mother called them. Sometime in high school I heard there was a "Tall Shop" in Tucson. The first time my mother and I went there, I was terribly disappointed. The

clothing was long, yes, but it was also clearly designed for people who were much older than I was.

A few years ago, I got to be that old. The clothing in the Tall Shop--especially the high rise pants--fit me perfectly. The low-riders? Not so much. So now the Tall Shops have all gone out of business. My long-tall-granddaughters can find high priced jeans at Buckles that fit them perfectly, but the pants there do not fit me at all.

I can only hope that the pants I have now turn out to be as indestructible as my mother's purple pantsuits. Based on her longevity, I'm going to need them to last for a very long time.

Happy Valentine's Day

Friday, February 12, 2010

One of our daughters works at a call center for an E-commerce company which shall, for the purposes of this post, remain nameless. She's coming up on her fifteenth anniversary with the company. She's proud of the job the company does, and she's also proud of the people in her department. They often find themselves guiding non-computer literate folks through the vagaries of on-line orders and deliveries which can go bad under the most ordinary of circumstances.

This week was definitely not ordinary. The dot com orders came in and came in, day after day. Tens of thousands of people ordered boxes of Valentine roses--36 red roses per box--that were due to be delivered by FedEx on Thursday or Friday of this week. As the weather went bad in the mid-Atlantic--as DC and NYC and other places shut down for days in the face of a record-breaking blizzard, the call center folks started worrying about how upset customers would be if those expected deliveries got canceled because of weather-related problems, but John Q. Public was not concerned. People kept right on ordering roses.

The people in the call center were already dreading another kind of blowback from this. For one thing, people may read in the fine print that the roses are coming in a BOX but in their mind's eye, they translate BOX into VASE and can turn very grumpy when their original supposition doesn't happen.

But the people who run the e-commerce world wanted to make sure the expected deliveries went as smoothly as possible, so on Wednesday of this week, they sent out more than 50,000 e-mail notices saying that FedEx would deliver their orders of Mother's Day Mixed Bouquets without requiring a signature. Whoa! Did you say Mother's Day? What about Valentine's Day? About ten minutes after that e-mail went out, the call center phone lines lit up, as in "H-E-L-L-O! I ordered flowers for Valentine's Day and I definitely expected R-O-S-E-S!"

By Thursday things were already looking bleak, and then they got worse. All those e-commerce roses are coming from growers in Columbia. What else do they grow in

Columbia? You guessed it--Cocoa Plants as in cocaine. And so yesterday, two someones who ordered roses in the Netherlands (From a different E-Commerce company, by the way) ended up receiving roses that had nine ounces of cocaine hidden in the packages. As a consequence, by yesterday afternoon, as I understand it, all the shipped FedEx roses had been returned to customs for rechecking.

And this is why, when I spoke our daughter this morning, she was dreading going to work. She was expecting a day of people swearing at her and telling her she's stupid--she isn't, by the way.

So here are a few points of Call Center Etiquette.

A: My daughter and her fellow workers did not set out to ruin your holiday. They are doing the very best they can to fix your problem under very tough circumstances. They want to help you. Give them the information they need so they can. And, by the way, many other people are calling, too. My daughter did not leave you hanging on hold for a very long time because she was hoping to make you miserable. She's working as fast as she can.

B: My daughter and her fellow workers do not control the weather. It's not their fault that D.C. had to shut down because the mayor didn't have a: enough working snow plows or b: enough salt. If this situation adversely affected your holiday plans I suggest you take it up with your elected officials.

Two years ago Seattle had a major Christmastime snowfall at the same time they had a mayor who was opposed to snowplows and also to putting salt on the roads because it would run off into Puget Sound. H-E-L-L-O!! Guess what? Puget Sound is part of the O-C-E-A-N. It IS salt water. (Yes, I know there is some fresh water around the Seattle area so save your breath.)

So the snow came to Seattle and commerce pretty much shut down. The Christmas presents we ordered--most galling of which was the de-icer for the driveway--DID NOT ARRIVE! The Brie my best friend sent me, the Harry and David pears from my in-laws, and the lefse I ordered from Montana, all managed to rot in a heated warehouse before it was delivered ten days later. But you know what? It wasn't the call center's fault. And guess what else? The salt free mayor isn't mayor any more, either!

C: The thugs who tried to ship roses spiked with cocaine are just exactly that. They are thugs! Actually, maybe they're terrorists. Aren't there places on this planet where celebrating Valentine's Day with anything red is a criminal offense? Bottom line, it is not the fault of the E-Commerce folks that the people at Customs are having to recheck all those packages which might contain something extra besides roses.

Here's a little bit of hard-won wisdom that we learned as a result of our snowed out Christmas. If your Valentine's present doesn't arrive on Valentine's Day, it isn't the end of the world. If your Valentine is still with you--our daughter's is not--celebrate

Valentine's Day when the gift you ordered does arrive. What's the downside here? You'd have to tell your significant other that you love him/her on more than just one day. Hey, if those roses come late enough, you can deliver the "I love you" message seven days in a row.

And before you call that 1-800 number to give the call center people a piece of your mind, take a deep breath and see if you can make it a nice piece of your mind instead of the other kind. What is it my mother used to say? Oh, I remember. You catch more flies with honey.

Okay, so here's the bad news. I write murder mysteries. I'm always looking around for people to knock off or to turn into bad guys. And if you're too mean to my daughter, you could end up in one of my books, maybe not by name, but we'll ALL know who I'm talking about!

Now, after all that, I have to add one more thing. Here it comes: Happy Valentine's Day to my IT guy, SW. Twenty-four years and counting with love from BMG, your Belated Mac Girl!

Wrangling with Writing

Saturday, February 20, 2010

The weekend crept up on me this week. Wednesday I did a radio interview. Thursday night I did a standing room only event for 200 or more at the Fountain Hills Library near Phoenix. Yesterday there was another radio interview in Prescott. Today I'll be doing a sold out Mystery Tea fundraiser for more than 250 to benefit the Yavapai County Humane Society. But here it is Saturday and I have yet to write my blog update.

In those events and interviews I find myself talking about writing, but I have to say that right this minute talking about writing is easier than doing it.

There's a writers' group in Arizona called The Society of Southwest Authors. Their annual conference is called Wrangling With Writing.

The title implies that the job is more difficult than people think, that instead of going out and just casually picking up the nearest idea, you have to sit down with it and herd it into some semblance of order. So instead of trying to say something fun or funny here, I'm going to say this:

Even after writing forty some books, writing isn't easy. It's work, and I'd better go do some today, right now!

A Step Back in Time

Friday, February 26, 2010

From 1968 to 1973 I served as a school librarian for the Indian Oasis School District in Sells, Arizona, on what was then the Papago Reservation and which is now the Tohono O'odham Nation.

Every week during that time I did individual storytelling presentation in 26 elementary school classrooms. Some of the stories were the stories I learned as a child--fairy tales like Cinderella and Rapunzel, but also ones I learned at library school like one about a plucky little girl named Molly Whuppie who rescues her two sisters before slaying an evil giant to save herself. Unlike SnowWhite, Molly isn't a character who sits around waiting for someone to come rescue her. I took four weeks to read all eight chapters of a charming children's book, Satchkin Patchkin, where a kind old woman uses her own industry and the help of the elfin Satchin Patchkin to outwit her evil landlord--a lean man, a mean man, a man without a smile. At least once a year I told a perennial favorite of both mine and of the children--Watty Piper's classic The Little Engine that Could.

While searching for storytelling materials, I discovered a mimeographed copy of the story of I'toi and Eagleman, one of the abiding legends of the Desert People. I'toi is the Spirit of Goodness, and Eagleman was a monster who came through the land, killing people, until I'toi finally dispatched him and then breathed life back into the bones of Eagleman's victims.

I told the story in classrooms for the first time in April one year and was promptly called into the principal's office by a concerned parent who warned me that the I'toi legends are winter telling tales. Like many Native American legends, these stories can only be told between November and March while the snakes and lizards are hibernating. If a snake or lizard happens to overhear one of those stories, he can swallow the storyteller's luck and bring him harm. I appreciated the warning then, and I've been careful to abide by those traditional rules ever since.

When I told the legend of I'toi and Eagleman, the Indian kids loved it because not only did it explain the origin of the Desert People, a tribe I'toi wanted to keep close at hand, it also explained the origin of the Mil-gahn, the Whites. I'toi's admonition to them was that he would "give them something with which to write, then he wanted them to go far away from him, across the ocean, and stay there."

When I took up writing, then, it seemed to me that I was doing what I'toi thought I should do, and when I wrote the four reservation-based books, I wove many of those legends, culled from Harold Bell Wright's book, Long Ago Told, into the mix. In fact, the legend of I'toi and Eagleman is the story that starts the first of those books, Hour of the Hunter.

Last December when I was in Tucson on a book tour, I learned that one of the local Barnes and Noble bookstores has an outreach program to Santa Rosa Ranch School, an elementary school on the reservation. Once a month, kids who have read enough and have outstanding attendance records can come to the store where they are given a \$10 gift certificate to buy whatever they want. I was thrilled and wanted to be involved, so I told the bookstore to let me know in advance of their next visit and I would come tell stories.

Today was that day. Two buses drove into the parking lot bringing eighty-five kids along with a collection of teachers and parents, some of whom were little kids back in the day when I was working on the reservation.

On storytelling day in the old days, I often wore a bright green dress and because I'm six feet tall, the kids used to refer to me as the Jolly Green Giant. Today when I went to the store, I wore a bright green shirt. I told them about the years I was on the reservation and showed them some of the treasures I still have from back then--a yucca, beargrass basket, shaped like an owl; a beaded bracelet; a tiny unfinished horsehair Tohono O'odham maze. And then I told three stories: The Little Engine That Could; I'toi and Eagleman; and The Fox Went Out on a Chilly Night. (Note: It isn't March yet, so telling I'toi and Eagleman was allowed.)

Seeing the kids smiling up at me while I was telling the stories was like stepping back in time. Having them come up afterwards to shake my hand and tell me thank you was a gift.

Yes, years ago I went to the reservation to be a teacher, but it turns out that the lessons I learned there have lasted me a lifetime.

Today was a day to give back.

The Club No One Wants to Join.

Saturday, March 6, 2010

Yesterday I visited a club no one wants to join. I was one of the speakers at the first-ever fundraising luncheon for the Evergreen Chapter of the ALS foundation.

ALS (Lou Gehrig Disease) is a neurological disorder that strikes mature adults. It robs victims of physical functions, trapping working minds in bodies that no longer do as they're told. There is no cure. Sometimes it's a long trip--a matter of years--and sometimes it's a short trip--a matter of months--from diagnosis to the inevitable. One of the things the foundation does, in addition to raising money for research, is to help provide mobility equipment and emotional backing for families stricken by this disease. And I do mean whole families. They were there yesterday. I met them.

I first became aware of ALS through one of my early book reps, Holly Turner. She was a sales rep who saw to it that my books ended up on the shelves in North West grocery

and drug stores and on the racks in airports, too. In the early days, she took me to early morning meeting with the truck drivers at Adams News. She said, "You wear a skirt, pantyhose, and heels. I'll bring the donuts, and you'll see. All of a sudden your books will be at eye level on the shelves." And they were.

The last time I saw Holly was at an event in Portland in August one year when she complained about her back hurting and said she was going to see her doctor the next week. A few months later in November I was at another book signing event. It was something Holly had set up and I was surprised that she was not in attendance. It was there someone told me she had been diagnosed with ALS.

I didn't know what to say to her, so, for a long time, I said nothing.

About a year earlier, I had been accosted at a signing by a guy in a wheelchair who said to me: "All you people who can walk do the same thing. Just because someone is in a wheelchair, you think we're all nice people. We're not, and I can prove it." (I guess Ron Peters was just more of a good guy than he could handle.) But I realized he was right. I had been stereotyping wheelchair-bound people as good guys, and I can take a hint.

The next book I wrote, *Name Withheld*, featured a person in a wheelchair who was NOT a good guy. In doing research for that book, I went to see a company in Woodinville, Northwest Mobility, run by Eddie and Amanda Rivera. They started out in the vehicle conversion business doing hot rods. Their business has now morphed into Absolute Mobility, and they are the largest purveyors of handicapped vehicles in the Pacific Northwest. (They were at the luncheon yesterday, too. It was the first time I had seen them again in fifteen or so years.) I was so impressed with them at the time that I put them in the book along with the story of how they left the sport of automotive hot-rodding for accessibility.

Back to my NOT calling Holly. I worried about it, but I still didn't pick up the phone. Then one day a few weeks later the Advanced Reader Copies of *Name Withheld* arrived on my doorstep. Holly had been off work, and it seemed likely that she hadn't read it. I was out walking my dogs later that day when I realized that if Holly's husband was remodeling their home to make it wheelchair accessible, the same thing needed to happen to their vehicle. I took the dogs back to the house, hung up their leashes, and then I called Holly to tell her about Northwest Mobility.

The last time I heard from Holly was a few months later. She was a talented gardener, and I called her for some Northwest gardening information. She and Ralph were in Louisiana, taking a round the country tour in their wheelchair-accessible van purchased from--you guessed it, Northwest Mobility. Holly was gone only a few months later, less than a year after her diagnosis.

Based on what I learned from Holly, I put an ALS patient in the first Ali Reynolds book, *Edge of Evil*. That eventually led me to a friendship with Patty, a fan in Montana who is also an ALS victim. I believe I've mentioned her in earlier posts. It was in honor both

Patty and Holly that I agreed to speak at the luncheon. The Seattle Mystery Bookshop often provides book sales at offsite events. They were there yesterday. I've worked with them and with J.B. Dickey for twenty plus years without ever knowing that his grandmother died of ALS.

What was clear to me yesterday is that ALS is a tragedy that leaves lasting effects on whole families. I met people who are dealing with these dreadful circumstances with cheerfulness and grace and determination. And I met a lot of other people--people who have been there before--who are amazingly generous about helping those who may just be starting down that long and winding road.

It was an honor to be there. It was an honor to be given an award and flowers, but I have to say I'm glad I'm not a REAL member of their club. But if you are, or if you'd like to become involved or contribute, please visit their website: http://webwa.alsa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=WA_homepage

I'm sure they'll appreciate the help.

Worth Waiting For

Saturday, March 13, 2010

I don't know where to begin this story. Thursday was our living room concert with Janis Ian here in Tucson. It was fun. Prior to the concert, Janis and I had tried singing together, but it didn't work. Not only are we short and tall, our voices are short and tall, too--mine being short (low pitched, what she calls "the key of R") and Janis's being high pitched. As a consequence, during the living room concert, I sang Janis's iconic song At Seventeen with her sitting right there beside me. Amazing. Mind bending.

(Janis here. I can't believe she said "It was fun." Fun? Not astonishing, illuminating, life-changing? I am not fun! I have a reputation for depression that you are busy wrecking!!)

Yesterday we went to Saddlebrooke to do an event, a luncheon for 350 people in a huge club house with very bad sight lines. Janis looked at the room and said, "We're stuck in a Cohen Brothers movie. Where is my guitar? I can't just talk to these people." The plan when we arrived was for each of us to speak for twenty minutes and then take questions. It was not a room that would take a Q & A.

The night before Janis and I had been chatting and laughing about doing a book called "Being famous for Dummies." We found out how much we had in common and how similar our experiences have been as we've walked our parallel paths. So I said, "Okay, how about we go onstage together and talk about what we have in common and what we don't have in common: Tall vs. short; Burger King vs. In-'n'-Out Burger; Democrat vs. Republican; Gay vs. straight; Jewish vs. Protestant. And what we do have in common: Insightful mothers who made huge differences in our lives; books and libraries that impacted our lives; less than wonderful first husbands who had substance abuse

problems and were both stalked by imaginary CIA guys. (Janis's response to that? "They're dead. We're alive. We win.")

(Janis again. All right. That's a little better. Not depressing, but at least horribly depressingly truthful. With attitude.)

One of the most memorable experiences for me at Saddlebrooke was when a woman walked up to me, shook my hand, and said, "Are you Janis Ian?" with Janis standing right there at my elbow. One woman, a ninety-something said to Janis, "I have NO idea who you are, but all the youngsters (in their eighties) just love you!"

We were fun. (There's that word again... fun....) We were hilarious. It reminded me of those rare times when Carol Burnett and Julie Andrews got to play together on TV. Janis told her story about the woman who came to a concert, fell to her knees, and prayed to Janis after her conversion from Judaism to Catholicism in the aftermath of a Janis Ian concert. I immediately topped that one with my story of the the guy who showed up at one of my signings saying, "I've just been acquitted of murdering seven people. Do you want to write my book?"

(Yeah, I'll write his book all right...) JAJ: How do you spell Ann Rule?

When Janis told about spending that last day with her mother, giving her what she wanted--Bailey's laced with ice cream-- I responded by telling about writing my parents' missed Thelma and Louise Exit into one of my books as a way of grieving for my parents and also as a way of honoring them.

We talked about real stuff. We laughed. I talked about her book. She talked about mine. And people were riveted. It was incredibly fun. I guess I already said that, but it was. Today we were informed that this morning we were "the talk of water aerobics" at Saddlebrooke. Not exactly a NYTimes review, but high praise indeed!

Also today, at the Book Festival, Janis was supposed to interview me, and tomorrow I was supposed to interview her. BORING!!! So we decided to do a redo of Saddlebrooke. When Debra, Janis's road manager, told the woman who was introducing us that there had been a slight change of plans, the color drained from her face and she said, "They can't do that. I'm only prepared to introduce J. A. Jance today. Janis Ian is tomorrow." I'm not sure exactly what Debra told her but I think it was probably a variation on a theme of try and stop them." To misquote Frank Sinatra, "We did it our way." Today I sang At Seventeen. Tomorrow Janis will sing it.

(I will be singing it in the key of B. Judy sings it in the key of R.)

We did our Being Famous for Dummies routine again to a roomful of more than 600 people. The audience gave us a standing ovation. Later on people told us it sounded like we had been doing it for years. Today was actually only our second time out. Tomorrow will be number three. We may end up having to take our show on the road.

(Please! Hire us! Get us out of this blog!! We are trapped!!!)

Our appearances today were lined up and organized by me. One after another. With no time for lunch. By three PM I was mostly dead. I tried to eat a sandwich--turkey on rye that was so dry I almost had to be Heimlich'd. Someone gave me a coffee drink of some kind that had enough sugar in it that I made it through to the end of the day. But just barely. And tomorrow is more of the same.

But Janis and I will come out the other end of this experience with something neither of us ever anticipated--an enduring friendship and maybe a whole new gig.

On The Banana Peel

Saturday, March 20, 2010

In the old days, back when I was just starting to write books and had young kids at home, they always watched the process with a certain degree of wariness. I'm sure there were occasions when they thought I was crazy. I remember one time, when I thought I was staring off into space and thinking about a book, my son thought I was staring at him. I also remember another time when I told my daughter we couldn't go to the bank because it was Saturday when it was Saturday only in the book I was writing and not in the real world.

In those days when money was very tight, I was coming from an insurance sales background where the end of every sales campaign was marked by a celebratory dinner. And so, in the shorthand of our family, finishing a book became a cause for celebration--and a dinner out. In other words, it became something to look forward to but no one could predict exactly when that celebration would occur.

I've said before that I don't do outlines. When I write a book, I start from the beginning and write to the end--usually. In most cases. Up to now, forty two books into the process. And the kids, in trying to get a handle on how things were progressing and when we'd be going out to dinner, used to ask me periodically how I was doing. If I said I was on the "banana peel," that meant I was screaming downhill toward the end of the book and they could count on something good happening for all of us very soon. (For one thing, turning in a book results in a delivery payment--translation a pay check!) So they started asking, "Mom, are you on the banana peel yet?"

Warning: The following paragraph is off the subject and it probably doesn't have a point, either, but it's my blog and I'll meander if I want to. Kids learn to speak the languages of their families, oddball statements and all. My mother often spoke of people who weren't smart enough to be "Adam's off ox," which I assume (I'm not looking this up!) was a reference to Adam (as in Adam and Eve) driving their first team of oxen. One ox would be the "off ox." Right or left? I have no idea, but I got the message. That off ox was . . . well . . . off. And not too smart, either. So my children, hearing about my being on the banana peel of a book, adopted the term in good faith without really

knowing what it meant. One day, as a sophomore, my daughter came home from Newport High School and said, "Mom, I finally understand what you mean. Today someone tossed a banana peel in the hallway. Somebody else stepped on it and down they went!") Thus endeth the aside.

Often when I'm out in public, people smile at me and say, "Being a writer is so much fun. You must enjoy it so much!" Or, "You're so prolific," (The dreaded P-word again!) that it must be so easy for you!" Not. The only people who think writing is easy are the ones who don't do it for a living.

I don't remember when the last post I wrote about writing was. I'm pretty sure it was several months ago, but I was already deep in the middle of this current book. It's tough to write about the "joy" of writing, when you're stuck in a living hell. This book, the next Ali book, has given me fits. I did not write it from the beginning to end. (See paragraph 3 above.) Instead I wrote from the beginning to 40 %, from the beginning to 50 %, from the beginning to 75%. According to my math skills, that means I've written 165% of this book without ever ONCE stepping on the banana peel. Without ever being able to bring the book to a logical conclusion. Because that's what it takes. Logic.

People who don't write operate under the mistaken notion that authors are somehow "in charge" of their characters. Au contraire! (An expression, by the way, that would NEVER have been used in the language of my family of origin.) Characters don't just haul off and do stuff because some hapless author said so. Or thought they should. There has to be a certain interior logic. I have to be able to look my character in the eye, (metaphorically speaking, of course) and say, "Are you kidding? Would you really do that?" And if the answer is no, then I need to take my little creative urges and go back to square one. (Is that from hopscotch or is it some kind of code word used in checkers or chess?) But in terms of writing a books--real honest to goodness books--it means I have to go back to the beginning, reexamine what the characters did or said, put them in the proper order, and make them work.

But finally, today, I can tell you with unbridled enthusiasm (I suppose that has something to do with happy horses!) that I am most definitely on the banana peel. And probably more than a little nuts. And not a moment too soon. Spring break is next weekend, and the grandkids are coming to visit.

Okay, enough said. Get to work.

Spring Break

Saturday, March 27, 2010

There's nothing like having a deadline!

The completed manuscript has now gone to my agent, and not a moment too soon. At this exact minute ten passengers--six grandkids and their respective parental units are in the air and winging their way to Tucson for Grandma's Spring Break Palooza. They

will be here for a full week. We'll start by having ties whacked off at Pinnacle Peak Steak House tonight. Tomorrow should be Old Tucson. We expect to go to the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum. We want to see wild flowers. We want to go shopping. We want to go to movies. We want to play miniature golf. We want to lounge around the pool. In other words, it should be a week to remember. It should also be fun

The youngest grandchild is four and a half. The oldest is sixteen and a half. It's going to be challenge finding activities that fit all. We'll see how that works out.

We're lucky that all the kids can come. We're lucky that they WANT to come. And we're also lucky that we have our health and can enjoy their being here.

So now it is Spring Break for me.

So wherever you are, have a great week, and we will, too.

April Musing

Friday, April 2, 2010

I survived April Fools Day in fine style and decided to collect some thoughts from last week's emails.

Several times in the last couple of weeks I've heard from people who have said, more or less, that they've just started reading my books and why haven't they heard of me before this. Well, I've been doing my best to get the word out--for twenty-five years now. When the first Beaumont book came out in original paperback in 1985, Adams News, the then major wholesaler of books to Seattle's grocery stores, drug stores, airports, and major bus depots everywhere, went off the deep end and bought fifty copies--for ALL of Seattle. Talk about dipping a toe in the water. By the time Adams News went away in the ever-changing world of the book business, they were bringing my books in by the pallet load. But that didn't happen all at once. It happened over time.

A man wrote to me recently complaining that an issue in one of the early Beaumont books could have been "easily resolved" by the use of DNA profiling. HELLO!! That book was written in 1984 when DNA profiling was pretty much a scientific pipe dream, and no, I do not get to go back and rewrite the books to adjust them to the changing world of law enforcement or even the changing world of the world. When I sent Beau to Port Angeles in the eighties with one of those big gray brick Motorola cell phones, it was really questionable whether the phone would work from there. That's not an issue in question now, but it was a big technical question back then.

And restaurants. Most of the time as soon as I mention one of my favorite restaurants in a book, it becomes a literary kiss of death. (Girvan's, The Doghouse, Fountain Court.) So far the original El Gaucho, Bis on Main, the Shanty, and the Mediterranean Kitchen have escaped that fate. In Tucson, Wag's is due to show up in this summer's

Queen of the Night, but right now the restaurant is only open a few days a week. In other words, sometimes the book doesn't even have to be published before bad stuff starts happening. I've responded to this problem by creating entirely fictional restaurants (Daisy's in Bisbee and The Sugarloaf Cafe in Sedona.) Then I hear from people complaining because they want to go there and eat.

And there's the guy from Phoenix who is still mad at me because he packed up his golf clubs and drove to Palominas looking for the Rob Roy Links. (Note: I write fiction, people. Fiction!)

And speaking of Queen of the Night--the new Walker Family book due out in July. The title is a reference to the night blooming cereus, a desert dwelling plant that blooms once a year. All the flowers bloom at once. They start to open in the early evening and they're gone, wilted away, by sunrise the next morning. The bloom takes place once a year sometime during the early summer months. My book is set in 2009. The plot requires that the fictional bloom takes place on a certain night in 2009. So what stunt did the REAL night blooming cereus do last year? It broke ranks and had two separate blooms. Not fair!

And then there are typos. This week I received an e-mail berating my copy-editing skills from someone who misspelled the "title of the boke" in question. (See how easy is it for errors like that to happen?) When I wrote to thank her and to let her know that the error in question had been noted and would be corrected in subsequent printings, she wrote back (sic) responded with yet another another spelling error. It made me smile. Copy-editing is an important part of the writing process and perfection is an illusion.

In honor of April Fool's Day, the lesson for the day is as follows: Don't take yourself so seriously. That's good advice for writers and it's also good advice for readers.

When a Throne is Not a Chair!

Monday, April 5, 2010

A few years ago, when we were decorating our new house, Bill and I engaged a the services an interior decorator for the first time. When we first married we had whatever furniture and/or equipment had come with us to the altar. Twenty four years ago, after six months of marriage and a complete kitchen remodel, we went to Bell Square to buy what turned out to be the world's most expensive pound of Seattle's Best Coffee.

In order to get to SBC, we walked through Frederick and Nelsons and found two couches we loved. We needed new couches. We also found a: a rug and b: two brass and glass tables and c: two Tiffany torchiere lamps. It was love at first sight for both of us. (We still remember hearing some guy whose wife was showing him the couch she wanted. His somewhat less than enthusiastic response was, "Well, I guess I could live with it.") But in F & N that morning we were both on the same furniture page. When the clerk asked how we intended to pay, Bill said, with some uncertainty, "You could put it on my account."

The reason he wasn't sure if his account would stretch that far is as follows. The month before we got married, we decided to buy a new bed and bedroom furniture. A friend, John Baetz, was selling furniture for Fredericks at the time. We found a set (which our daughter still has and uses). When John asked Bill the same question, how do you plan to pay, Bill said, "I'm not sure if this will fit on my account." John Baetz said, "I'll fix your account." And he did.

That Saturday morning, a couple of months later, the F & N clerk did some fiddling with her computer and then came back and asked. "When would you like this delivered?" We then went on to buy the coffee and the two couches, the rug, the lamps, and the brass and glass tables came home a few days later. The brass and glass tables are the only things that have disappeared. The two white couches have survived for 24 years and are still in reasonable shape because we used slip covers on them during the years when we had kids and dogs at home. (I am not a person who makes dogs stay off couches.) So the couches are in Tucson, the rug is in Tucson, and the lamps are in Bellevue.

But back to the decorator. I had never hired a decorator before. We met up at Dania. In forty-five minutes I picked out a dining room set, four easy chairs, a couch, a headboard and side tables, as well as a desk and credenza. The decorator said he had NEVER been on a shopping trip like that before. But, I mean, why waste time? He also found it hilarious that the only way I would buy a chair or couch was by SITTING in it. Decorators are all for looks. As far as I'm concerned, when it comes to chairs, comfort is everything.

Which brings me to today. We are snowbirds. Our intention this week was to migrate back north, avoiding snow. Or so we thought. We had planned on going up through the middle of Nevada. It's a beautiful trip through a lot of empty territory where you might see another vehicle say every thirty minutes or so. But then, Wednesday morning, in Vegas, we read the weather report. Being caught in a snow storm on one of the empty mountain passes in central Nevada somehow didn't seem like a good idea. We opted, instead, for I-15 through Salt Lake.

It's 400 miles, and driving through the Virgin River Gorge is utterly spectacular, but shortly after we arrived in Utah, we hit a storm. We drove in a: hail; b: sleet; c: snow; and d: rain. And I don't mean just any rain. I mean rain that came down so hard it was almost impossible to see. Yesterday we finally got far enough north that the clouds broke up just outside Missoula, Montana. That's an amazing storm front that stretches from the Canadian border to Tucson and is probably bringing the threat of tornadoes to the Southeast this weekend.

So we decided to stay over in Spokane and visit with our three granddaughters and have dinner with them tonight. We are in a very nice hotel which shall remain nameless. Some of you may be able to figure it out from decor details, but right this minute I'm sitting in a decorator approved but very uncomfortable chair. A chaise, really.

Covered with something that's supposed to resemble leopard skin. It fits in with the hotel's safari motif, but how it ever passed even the most rudimentary comfort test is more than I can imagine. And, bad as it is, it's not the world's MOST uncomfortable chair. That prize goes to either the bean bag chair or the molded plastic desk chair in one room at a VERY upscale Scottsdale hotel which will also remain nameless. Tried those chairs, said nope these don't work for us, and went to another hotel altogether.

So I'm sitting here typing this with my computer resting on my knees. Not good for my knees. Not good for my wrists. Not good for blogging. I guess I'll go downstairs and see if there are actual chairs down there, ones that were built with the human body in mind.

Lost and Found

Friday, April 9, 2010

I grew up in Bisbee, Arizona--originally in a suburb of Old Bisbee called Warren. Our street, Yuma Trail, is actually a winding half mile of barely paved road that starts at the top of a hill at a spot called Necker's Knob and ends the better part of a mile later at the bottom of the hill where Yuma Trail intersects with Warren's Main Street. Believe me, that's using the term Main Street advisedly. Yuma Trail was back then and still is the last street in town. On the other side of the street, what we called "up across the road," is cattle grazing country.

Our house was situated in a relatively flat section of the street halfway down Yuma Trail. Seven Busk kids lived there. At the top of the hill, just below Necker's Knob, was another family with seven kids, the Angeleris. We kids tended to pair up by age. I hung out with Donna, my younger brother Arlan ran around with Donna's younger brother, Victor, and our even younger brother, Jim, was friends with their little sister, Mary Lou. During the summers we scrambled around barefoot on rocky outcropping in the desert on the far side of Yuma Trail. We would pile four kids into our Radio Flyer wagon (note: no helmets, no knee pads, no shoes) and go screaming down the hill, across Main Street without stopping at the stop sign, and half way up the first hill on Cole Avenue. We did not die. What we did do is jump out of the wagon, drag it back up the hill, and do it again. We crushed mulberries with our bare feet. It took a good six months of wearing school shoes for the previous summer's purple dye to wear off the soles of our feet. We shot cans with BB guns. We did NOT put our eyes out. We went wading in the ponds by the copper mine's tailings dump. I remember how pretty the mine water was with all those no doubt noxious chemicals that made the water in those ponds all the colors of the rainbow and permanently stained whatever clothing we were wearing at the time.

And let's not forget the time in second grade when Arlan and Victor were playing pilots in one of the apricot trees in our yard. I was learning to ride a two-wheeler. I could pedal forward all right, but working the brakes was beyond me. The only way I knew how to stop was to jump off--with both feet. I was wobbling my way under the apricot tree just as Arlan and Victor decided it was time to bail out of their burning plane using

non existent parachutes. Victor fell to earth directly in front of me and my bicycle. Jumping off with both feet wasn't an option. I remember the bump as the first wheel ran over Victor, and I remember the bump as the second when ran over Victor. It was definitely a hit and run because I ran screaming to my mother, sure that I had killed him. He wasn't dead. He wasn't even hurt, but I was permanently scarred.

And it writing this, I'm coming to understand that being mothers in the Fifties in Bisbee must have been challenging.

But then, about the time I hit third grade, the Angeleris left town, disappearing with no warning or at least with very little as far as I was concerned. I knew they went to California, but that was it. As someone who was just then learning to write cursive, there was no way to keep in touch with the little girl who had been my best friend, Donna.

Their house was sold and remodeled and turned into a rental. The first family that lived there was named Conway. They were an interesting group. Joe, the father, worked briefly as an announcer for the local radio station. The mother, Sally, was a stay at home wife and mother to their two kids, Diana and her younger brother, Joe. The kids called their parents "Joe" and "Sally. The entire family went on long bicycle treks on the weekends. This was at a time when no other adults in Bisbee would have been caught dead riding bicycles. Diana was a year older than I. She was, in my unsophisticated opinion, a talented, intellectual giant. She practiced the piano for four hours every day without having to be told. She and I went hiking in the desert looking for fossils and climbing steep cliffs. And we both loved to read. The school library was kept open one day a week during the summers. We put my old Radio Flyer to good use hauling loads of books back and forth.

It was a magical summer, but that's all it was. Three months after the Conways arrived in Bisbee, they moved on as well. Like the Angeleris before them, they disappeared into the wilds of California. For a long time after they left, Diana and I maintained a sporadic pen-pal connection. The summer between eighth grade and high school, I went to California on the train by myself (money saved from babysitting) to visit with Diana and her family in Sherman Oaks. About the time we both graduated from college in the mid-Sixties--she was a year older than I--she married and joined the Peace Corps. After that we lost track of one another.

One of Helen Reddy's songs speaks to this: Where is the friend, the friend that I lost, at a fork in the road and never found again?" When I heard that one, I always wondered about both Diana and Donna. What had happened in their lives? Where were they? What were they doing? Did they ever think about me in the same way I thought about them? And, if we met again after so many years, would we still be friends?

I'm a person who takes the loss of friendship seriously. I'm in touch with my post-Donna best friend, Pat Hall, on a weekly basis. Pat and I met in fourth grade, the year after the Angeleris left town. For a lot of years while we were both raising kids, Pat and I did little

more than send Christmas cards back and forth. Now we do e-mail, several times a week as time permits, but for a long time Diana and Donna were still among the missing.

In the Eighties I started searching for Diana Conway in earnest but with no success. For one thing, I had no recollection of her married name. I wrote a poem about her that appears in my book of poetry, *After the Fire*. It's called *Maiden Names*, for Diana Conway from Judy Busk, and it goes like this:

We were young girls together,
Eleven or twelve at most
Yet our conversations soared
To galaxies afar.

We carried books by wagon load,
Dug for fossils,
Climbed a rock or two
And swore that they were mountains.

We lost each other later
In a maze of married names
That easily erased all trace
Of those two friends together

I think of you, Diana,
And I know,
Our paths must be in parallel.
I only hope someday they'll cross again.

When *After the Fire* was first published in 1984, I hoped somehow that the poem would lead me to Diana. Now I understand how naive and lame THAT idea was. After all, it was poetry! Nobody reads poetry!. But you need to remember that I spent ten years of my life selling life insurance, and I don't give up.

Six years later, in 1990, I dedicated my first hardback, the thriller *Hour of the Hunter*, to "Diana Conway, wherever she is." I named the main character in that book, Diana, in honor of my long lost friend. Then I sat back and waited to see if anyone would notice. Ten years later my literary trap line paid off when a woman at a book signing in Anchorage asked me about Diana Conway and said she knew someone by that name. As soon as she mentioned her Diana Conway's married name, I knew it was the right one. A few minutes later, we were talking on the phone and reestablishing our friendship. I hear from Diana about once a week, too. She lives in Alaska but this week she's on her way to Mexico City to visit friends there. We have radically different opinions about religion and politics, but we're still friends. And I was right about our lives being in parallel. Things with her first husband didn't work out particularly well, but the second man in her life did--which is what happened in my life, too. Like me, she is a

writer of children's books and stories. For years she wrote a column for the Anchorage newspaper. All that time, there she was, hiding in plain sight.

Finding Diana left only Donna Angeleri on my MIA friendship list. Since my literary trap line had worked once, I decided to try it again, but I was still up against that unknown married name issue. Most of the time, my son-in-law being the exception, men don't change their names when they marry. And so, when I wrote the second Ali Reynolds book, *Web of Evil*, I named a character in the story after Donna's younger brother, Victor Angeleri. I dedicated the book to "Donna A., the last missing piece of my childhood." And then I waited some more. This time it only took five years for the trap line to work. This week one of Donna's nephews sent me a note complete with Donna's snail mail address. Yesterday I wrote to her for the first time in almost sixty years and sent her a copy of the book that is dedicated to her. I don't know if she'll write back or not, but it is with great satisfaction and thankfulness that I can tell you what was lost is found.

Scavenger Hunt!

Friday, April 16, 2010

Usually when I finish writing a book, I step back, take a few deep breaths, and turn my back on the whole idea of writing for a little while. I could tell you that I'd go see a pro and try to improve my golf game, but would be untrue. As a consequence my golf game will continue to be abysmal for the foreseeable future. I write fiction, but I try not to tell lies.

Some people who have followed this blog, and especially neophyte writers, will recognize that I am in a period of time I call a literary black hole. It's the peculiar limbo between the time I turn in my manuscript and the time I hear from my editor. It's a time when, in a feat of mental derring do, I try to do two things--two diametrically opposite things--because I need to let go of the characters I just spend untold hours with to go on to the ones in the next book. Simultaneously, I need to keep in mind what happens in the recently completed book so I'll be able to deal with the dreaded "editorial letter,"--the missive that comes from New York and outlines the changes my editor feels it is necessary to make to the manuscript in order to improve it. That's what editors do.

Right now I'm dealing with a new editor. With my previous editor, I would turn in the manuscript and within three days, FedEx included, I would have my work cut out for me. Years ago, that was how I spent almost all of our last Hawaiian vacation--working on rewriting Joanna Brady # 5, *Skeleton Canyon*. I turned in the manuscript on Tuesday and expected that I would be able to go on vacation the following week with a completely clear conscience. Not!! On Tuesday, the day before we were scheduled to leave for Hawaii, the editorial letter arrived along with the manuscript. As originally written, the story was told through five different points of view. My then-editor didn't like three of them. She wanted me to ditch the three unwanted points of view and have the manuscript back to her the day BEFORE we were due to return from Hawaii.

That meant I spent our entire week's worth of vacation in our hotel, working on the book. Bill spent HIS vacation in that same hotel WATCHING me work on the book. This is very much like watching GRASS GROW!!! I had to take the book apart, remove all the scenes told from the unapproved point of view, rewrite them through one of the remaining points of view, and then, using literary duct tape, reinsert the new scenes into the book. Right now, years later, it sounds like an easy thing to do. I can assure you it wasn't easy when I was actually doing it.

I finished the process the day before the day the manuscript was supposed to be in New York. Because of time zone issues, it had to be in the mail two days early in order to make the deadline. We were on Kauai at the time. This was the mid-nineties. We finally managed to find an office supply store that used an early generation ink-jet printer for customer jobs. The problem was, it wouldn't do jobs bigger than forty pages. The manuscript weighed in at 400 +. (Some of you are probably wondering why didn't she just go to Kinkos? HELLO!! There were no Kinkos back then, at least not on Kauai.) It was the biggest job this office place had ever undertaken, and it took ALL day. But the manuscript made it to New York in time, and I got to play exactly one terrible round of golf during our vacation. Hey, wait a minute. If I'd been able to play more golf back then, maybe my game would be better now. No. On second thought, that's just making excuses.

But now, current time, I have a brand new editor. Not an editor who is new to editing, but an editor who is new to me. I sent her the manuscript for Ali Reynolds # 6, Fatal Error, the better part of two weeks ago. And then nothing happened for a very long time. (You have to understand that the words 'for a very long time' mean one thing on this end of the road and something else entirely in New York. In the world of publishing two weeks is considered to be something less than a blink of the eye.)

So while I was waiting--trying to remember the book and trying to forget it--I decided I could either go to work on the next book, or I could drive myself nuts. I had an idea for the next book and Bill and I discussed it. When books are in the idea stage, they are very FRAGILE. Bill's reaction was that it was a terrible idea. To prove him wrong, I sat down the VERY NEXT DAY and started writing the "terrible idea book." (I suspect this is a strategy Bill will try again from time to time because as of right now, I have written way more of that so far unnamed book than I would have thought possible.) For those of you who are dyed in the wool Beaumont fans, I will tell you this is a Beaumont, due to be published in July of 2011.

By now, though, some of you may have noticed that I named this blog entry Scavenger Hunt, and you're probably wondering if I'm EVER going to get to the point. Here it is.

The unnamed book I'm working on is the 43rd (43!!!) book I've written between the middle of March of 1982 and now. Do the math. That's a lot of books. That's a lot of words and a lot of characters.

For a long time I didn't keep a name file for my books, I was able to keep it all in my head. That necessary file didn't get created until Joanna Brady # 2 which was more than thirteen books into the process. And that was on my PC. The Beaumont Name file I had once upon a time, didn't make the transition to my new computer a few books ago when I threw my last Toshiba into the drawer and became an MG. (Mac Girl.) And yes, I know I could dig the computer out of the drawer and the file out of the PC and transport it into my Mac, but not when the PC is in Seattle and my Mac and I are at work in Tucson.

So here's the problem. In the process of writing Beaumont 20 (as it is currently known in my computer file) I need Beaumont's mother's given name. I know her last name, but not her first name. Beaumont always refers to her as "mother." Beau's grandmother, Beverly, always refers to her daughter as "your mother." At least as far as I've been able to learn so far. Ditto for Beaumont's English teacher from Ballard High School. These are two separate problems with two separate winners.

This is the scavenger hunt part. I'm asking for help. The first person who can tell me Beau's mother's given name or the Ballard High School English teacher's name and quote me book title, chapter, and page number, I promise to use that person's name in this book. (I have final say on how your name is used, however.) Those are the two prizes--the only prizes. So get reading, people. The author needs your help

The Scavenger Hunt Worked!

Saturday, April 17, 2010

Yesterday afternoon my husband posted a blog entry in which I asked for help finding the names of two characters from the Beaumont books, all nineteen of them, because I needed to reuse those characters in the book I'm writing now, currently known as Beaumont 20. And this morning, due to having diligent readers, I have both needed names. Thank you Rebekah and Joan! Now I can go back to writing with a renewed sense of purpose.

It's nine o'clock. We've spent the last hour sitting out on the patio in Tucson, barefoot and drinking coffee. The back yard is beautiful at this time of year. The fountain is burbling away. The geraniums, petunias, and snap dragons in the garden pots that line the patio are gorgeous. (We would have had poppies, too, but the ground squirrels ate those right down to the roots.) The orange blossoms are ending this year's run. I caught the first hint of their indelible perfume right at the end of March, when we brought the kids and grandkids home from the airport for their spring break visit. Three weeks later, they're pretty much done, but you can't beat orange blossoms in the spring. The shrubbery around the interior wall--the jasmine, the lantana, and photinia--is especially lush this year because of all the rain we had earlier.

But we're snowbirds. Next week we have to leave here and go back home to Seattle for the summer, but I seem to be having a serious case of separation anxiety. If I were a dog, I would grab the wooden leg on some piece of furniture or another and chew the

daylights out of it. How do I know about that? That would be due to a dog we had once, Boney, aka Mr. Bone, who taught me everything I ever needed to know about separation anxiety.

Boney, came to us as a pound puppy, a handful--literally, one-hand handful--of scrawny, needy dogdom. He was far too young to be away from his mother, but he was already out in the cold, cruel world. Our son had adopted him from the pound in Pullman. I made the mistake of offering to house break the new puppy. The way dogs work, Bone ended up being mine for the duration.

Boney may have been tiny to begin with, but he grew like Topsy. By the time he was grown, we were able to trace his heritage through his distinctive looks. He was clearly half German shepherd and half Irish wolfhound. He was huge but he was also basically insecure. When we had to leave the house, he went into chewing mode. There was a potted palm tree in our home at the time Bone came to live with us. The plant was about the size of a self-respecting ficus. Boney ate that thing down to the dirt, one leaf and one tree trunk at a time--sort of like the ground squirrels ate this year's crop of poppies. Once the tree was gone, he started looking for something else to chew and ended up eating my daughter's brand new Ray Ban sunglasses. The was the occasion of my giving my daughter a piece of motherly advice for which she has NEVER forgiven me. "You have to forgive him," I said. "After all, he's only a dog."

But then that same dog did the unforgivable--he ate my checkbook, cover and all. End of forgiveness. Boney spent the next six weeks of his life doing boot camp obedience training in Bothell at Washington's Academy for Canine Behavior, where they taught him to be secure in being a dog. No more separation anxiety. He never chewed up anything again, and for the next ten or so years he was a perfectly gentlemanly dog. (By the way, if you're anywhere in Western Washington and are dealing with a "troubled" dog, don't waste your time on a doggy psychologist. Send him to the Academy. All of our dogs are Canine Academy Alums, and so are most of our grand-dogs.)

So here I am with my own severe case of separation anxiety. I'll deal with leaving Tucson's 70° weather to return to Seattle's 53° in the only sensible way I know how. I'm on my way to the nearest Macayo to have a pair of shredded beef tacos.

No Simple Solution

Saturday, May 1, 2010

This week I've had several e-mails from fans who have asked me what I think about "what's going on in Arizona." People who have been reading my books for years have probably noticed there have been references to the illegal immigration problem in my stories for years, too, because this is not a new problem.

For starters let me say this. I'm the granddaughter of an illegal immigrant. My grandfather, A. G. Anderson, fled Sweden at age 19 when he was accused of poaching in a game preserve. According to him, he shot a deer which crossed over into the game preserve before it died. This could all be entirely true, but this is also the same grandfather who put a wet dishrag down the back of my shirt and called me a "wetback." Grandpa was a storyteller. He was in his seventies when my mother invited him to go along on a trip to the "old country" to see his brothers. He said "No!" in no uncertain terms. It took my mother a matter of months to get to the bottom of his objection, but finally the truth came out--he had never become a citizen. He went on that trip with her--on a Swedish passport--and did become a U.S. citizen officially before he died. So I have an oar in the water in this regard and maybe even an ax to grind. Who knows how many metaphors I'll be able to shoe-horn into this paragraph? That's the miracle of writing a blog. It can be a haven for free-range metaphors and there's no one to say, "Stop, hold, enough!"

So let's pretend. Let's pretend that all the people who currently live in Tacoma decide to pull up stakes and come live in Seattle, bringing all their issues and family dynamics right along with them. To say nothing of their children. And let's say that Seattle PD was suddenly downsized to a police force made up of 130 individuals, a number that would include all sworn officers, all jail personnel, and clerical staff as well. These "illegal Tacomans" who might or might not speak English, would want to enroll their children in suddenly over-crowded and budget-strapped schools although the new arrivals probably wouldn't own their own homes, the taxes on which are used to fund public education. These migrating illegal Tacomans would want to drive cars although it's unlikely that they would be licensed drivers or insured drivers. If they became ill, they would be able to go to Emergency Rooms for free treatment which the hospitals, by federal mandate, are required to give them. (Unfortunately, although federal law dictates there must be treatment, it happens to be an unfunded law.) If the hospitals can't afford to provide it, well then, they can always shut down their ERs. That way they won't be treating the "for free" patients, but they won't be treating any other patients, either. Most of these migrating Tacomans would come here looking for a better life or a better job. Some of them, however, would be bad guys bringing their brand of crime right along with them.

By now you're probably wondering if I'm nuts. Surely all those people in Tacoma will stay put. But now think about Arizona. More specifically think about Cochise County. Yes, it's been in the news lately because a long time area rancher was shot off his ATV the day after he reported what appeared to be a drug deal going down on his property. This particular rancher had long been known for his kindness to illegals crossing his property. Guess what, the drug cartels weren't interested in his history of kindness. They wanted him gone, and now he is.

Cochise County is eighty-miles square. The southern border of the county is also the southern border of the United States. And remember that pretend police department number from paragraph number three? That's how big the Cochise County Sheriff's Department really is--130 people strong. And how many illegal immigrants come

through Cochise County? A few years ago in fiscal year 1999/2000, 640,000 illegals were APPREHENDED in the Tucson sector, and many if not most of those came through Cochise County. Last year the number was right around 300,000! That may be an improvement, but it's not one worth bragging about.

Illegal immigrants often set off across the desert without adequate food or water and die of exposure or heat exhaustion. They are ferried through the county with dozens of people crammed in speeding SUVs and die when those vehicles are involved in roll-over accidents after which the survivors are air-lifted to one or the other of Arizona's few remaining trauma centers. (Airlifting, by the way, costs approximately \$40,000 a pop, also an unfunded mandate.) The environmental damage left behind as these walkers shed their backpacks and garbage is mind-boggling. They cut fences and let livestock out onto highways. They break into houses and rob people. They steal vehicles. And there aren't enough law enforcement officers to keep up with the accompanying problems and even if there were, the jails are already too crowded. Oh, and did I mention that Phoenix, Arizona, is the kidnap capital of the world? More drug cartel related kidnappings.

The drug war that's taking place on our borders and in our border towns is a lot more serious than just "saying no." And so are the armed thugs in the people smuggling war. This is a shooting war. With automatic weapons, grenades, and roadside bombs. Burning down buildings. Assassinations of police, mayors, newspaper reporters and ordinary citizens. People are dying on both sides of the border. The cartels are better funded than the Taliban. And in many cases, they're far better armed than our own Border Patrol. This isn't just friendly "Juan the gardener anymore".

This is a problem that has been years in the making. For good or ill, the Arizona State Legislature has decided to make like the Little Red Hen and tell the feds, "If you won't do it, I'll do it myself."

Yes, there are people all over the country who are saying that Arizona is overreacting. But, as we used to say on the reservation, maybe they need to walk a mile in those Arizona moccasins. It's easy to sit in San Francisco or Seattle and complain about those crazy Arizonans, but illegal immigration isn't just Arizona's problem anymore; it's everybody's problem.

Mother's Day

Friday, May 7, 2010

It's Mother's Day and I'm going to talk about the most influential woman in my life--my mother. She's been gone for years now, but I still hear her words. I often recognize her as the source when one of them emerges from my own mouth in the things I say to my husband, my children, and my grand children. (As in, "Don't listen to what I say. Listen to what I MEAN.") And I also see reflections of her wisdom in what my characters say to and about their own mothers. Guess what? They all have a lot in common, Evie. Evelyn. Evelyn Allegra. I would tell you the rest of her name, but my bank seems to

think that knowing my mother's maiden name is sufficient to identify me over the phone or for my daughter to identify herself over the phone for her bank by knowing MY maiden name. So Evie is it.

Evie came from Summit, a small town in northeastern South Dakota. My dad came from Marvin, an equally small town ten miles away. Family legend has it that my father originally went to Summit courting my mother's younger sister Toots. According to our maternal grandfather, AG, he told him, "Norman, in this house we eat the old bread first." As a consequence, my father spent the next sixty-eight years of his life with my mother, Evie, rather than with Toots.

My mother had to drop out of school after seventh grade. She went to Minneapolis and went to work as the maid of the man who drew the Red Ryder comics and his invalid wife. The first thing she did after was making money was to pool her resources with her two older sisters to go together and buy THEIR mother a washing machine.

My father graduated from high school and spent a year at normal school getting a teaching certificate. Although my mother didn't have a high school diploma, her grammar and punctuation were on the money. And well into their nineties she and my father between them could knock out NYTimes crossword puzzles in record time.

They were a team. With seven kids, they had to be, and they made it clear that our family was NOT a democracy. What they said went. There was none of this dividing and conquering business. What one of them said or did the other one backed to the hilt.

Grandma--as I came to call her--was a stay at home wife when that was the way life worked. She was a talented seamstress who sewed most of my clothes, all the way through high school. She cooked three meals a day in a world where there were no microwaves or electric dishwashers. She made great use of her pressure cooker, however, and for dishwashing she had a full set of biological washers and dryers. We ate meals together, all of us seated at the kitchen table where we were expected to "eat a little of everything and everything on our plates," including gaggy parsnips for me and green peas for my brother Jim. Our mother washed clothes on Monday, ironed on Tuesday, baked on Wednesday, and cleaned house with a vengeance on Saturday.

No one was exempt from Saturday house cleaning. I particularly hated shaking rugs, dusting the piano, and the dusting the blinds. Believe me, there was plenty of dust. This was Bisbee, Arizona, after all. There was no AC, so windows were always left open. Every weekday at five past three, workers for Phelps Dodge would blast another huge chunk of the mountain away as they dug down into Lavender Pit. So yes, there was definitely plenty of dust. But there was also time for fun. Once the Saturday morning chores were finished there was likely to be a game of tag with our mother chasing some or all of us kids, around and around the circular pattern inside our house, with our ugly mutt of a dog, Daisy, chasing her for all she was worth.

My mother ran the family with an attention to detail that would have made your average Marine Drill Sergeant proud. We all had multiple commitments--Brownies, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Pilgrim Fellowship, Bible School, paper routes, TV Guide routes, band practice, Little League, school sporting events, talent shows, oratorical contests, you name it. Our mother knew where we were supposed to be, when we were supposed to be there, and when we were supposed to be back. And she did all that without benefit of a reminder showing up on a computer somewhere.

In the early sixties, my father went into the life insurance business. For the next twenty years, my mother handled his birthday cards, addressing them by hand at the beginning of each month and putting a day notation up under the stamp so she could be sure to mail it in time for it to arrive exactly on the client's birthday. She kept track of who was new to town so my brothers could go there and sign them up as customers for their paper routes or my father could go sell them some insurance.

So, yes, my mother was a taskmaster, but she also had a sense of humor. I think that's one of the things that made my parents' sixty-eight year marriage such an unqualified success. They both loved a good practical joke. They loved to tell the story about how, just after they married, they lived in a house in Twin Brooks, South Dakota. The house was close to the rail road track. Every night, at supper time (always supper, never dinner) a train would speed through, blasting its whistle at the crossing. One night my mother decided that when the train came through that night, she would act like she was scared to death and dive under the table. She did so only to come nose to nose with my father who had decided to pull the same trick.

I remember there being plenty of laughter in our house growing up. There were lots of jokes. Our mother always seemed to know exactly what she was getting for Christmas. We fooled her one year when all of the kids joined forces to get her a gift certificate at the local nice dress shop--as opposed to her usual J. C. Penneys. My brother created a container that had four corners on one end and three on the other. He wrapped the wooden frame in cardboard, put the gift certificate inside, and then covered the whole thing with wrapping paper. No matter how many times she picked it up and shook it, that was one present she wasn't able to figure out until she unwrapped it.

Our parents were great travelers. They went to Europe together and also to Australia. (Did I mention that my mother's favorite subject in school was Geography?) On domestic car trips my father drove. In those days, long before car seats for kids or GPS systems for travel directions, my mother served as co-pilot on their long car trips with a child perched on one knee and an open road atlas on the other. Considering that, it's hardly surprising that in her later years she had problems with the veins in her legs. But she always got us where we needed to go with a minimum of fuss. Every other year we made a trek (two and a half days in the car) to visit with all the South Dakota relatives. On the off years, we went other places--Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, the Seattle World's Fair.

I usually called her on Sunday afternoons, just to check in. Once year Bill and I spent several weeks off on a European trip which made the Sunday calls tough. When we got back, I tried calling her. No answer. No answer for several days. I finally called one of my sisters. She explained that my mother's brother Glenn had died, and the Folks (as we also called them) had gone to South Dakota for his funeral. They were both well into their eighties then. When they learned of the death, they checked on flying but decided that the flight situation was complicated enough that they would drive instead. I knew that when they were in Milbank, they always stayed at the Millstone Motel, so I called there only to be told that they had checked out just that morning. So I timed them. They were slowing down a little then. I gave them three days to get back home instead of the standard two and a half and then I started calling again. (No they did NOT have a cell phone. Ever!) No answer. No answer. No answer. Finally, several days after they should have been home, my mother picked up the phone. "Where have you been?" I demanded. "Well," she said. "That morning as we were leaving Milbank I said to Norman, 'There's one National Park we've never visited.'" So they drove home from South Dakota to Arizona by way of Yosemite!

She told me later that as they crossed into Arizona at Yuma at the end of that trip and saw all those stark mountains, she realized that they wouldn't be taking driving trips like that ever again, and she sat there in the car and shed a tear.

My mother never managed to forgive my father for having a stroke and dying and leaving her behind. And when she died several years later, I shed no tears because she was more than ready to go.

My mother was the person who, despite her own lack of education, made sure that I got into college. When I came home with a first husband who was something less than wonderful, she kept her mouth shut about him--for eighteen years. She took care of grandkids when needed. She supported her kids. She was a rock for all of us.

Happy Mother's Day, G. And Happy Trails, too. I trust you and Gramps are together again, and traveling to your heart's content.

I Lost a Friend This Week

Wednesday, May 12, 2010

You and I lost a friend this week. People who lived in the Seattle area in the early eighties will remember the name Gary Flynn. He was Seattle P.D.'s Public Information Officer, back in the old days when that's what they were called. He died suddenly of a heart attack this past week in Prescott, Arizona, leaving behind Cynthia, his wife of twenty-two years. He was seventy five years old. For those of you interested in reading his obituary, here's the link from the Prescott Courier:

<http://dcourier.com/main.asp?SectionID=167&SubSectionID=468&ArticleID=80930>

I met Gary when I was starting out in the world of mystery writing, working on the first Detective Beaumont book. Until Proven Guilty was and is a police procedural set in the Seattle Police Department. I was determined to write it even though I had never been a police officer and had lived in Seattle for less than two years. When I hit a snag and had no idea how something would work in a real police department, I picked up the PHONE BOOK (No such thing as Google back then!) There, under the listings for Seattle P.D., I found the words Public Information Officer, along with a phone number. "Hey," I thought. "I'm public." So I picked up the phone and dialed. "Flynn." was the word I heard on the other end of the phone.

I explained who I was and what I needed and Gary patiently answered whatever that first question was. It turned out that, as I went along, there were lots more questions, and he answered all of those as well. He put me in touch with people in the Crime Lab. He put me in touch with people in the Medical Examiner's office. Having Gary there to make the introductions was a huge leg up in the credibility department. He took me upstairs in the old Seattle P.D. building where we rode on that eternally slow elevator. He showed me around the homicide squad on the fifth floor.

When I finished writing that first manuscript, I fired up my Daisy Wheel Printer and printed off a copy for him, paper jams and all. Then I took it to Gary and asked if he would read it.

Those early years of writing were tough. I had two kids, no child support, and a full time job selling life insurance. (If you want to be a writer, by the way, selling life insurance is a GREAT way to learn how to handle REJECTION!) The kids came with a full docket of activities--school functions, Cub Scouts, Brownies, soccer, T-ball. Between juggling all of those and doing my job, the only time I had available for writing was from 4 AM to 7 AM every morning, before I got the kids up and ready to go to school and got myself ready to go to work. Afternoons were full of kid stuff, and when they went to bed, I went to bed, too. (Oh, did I mention I didn't have much of a social life?)

So one night, I was in bed and sound asleep at 9 PM when the phone rang. Gary didn't introduce himself, but I recognized his voice when he said accusingly, "You made me cry!"

"Whooooee boy!" I remember thinking. "I did it!"

And it seemed to me, that if I could make a long time police officer shed a tear or two that I was starting to make the grade. I asked him if there was anything that he noticed that was wrong. "Well," he said, "you had departmental visitors wearing visitor's badges. We don't do that, although we probably should." And, of course, they do now, twenty five years later!

Then all our lives changed. I married Bill and moved from Seattle to Bellevue to continue writing. Gary married Cynthia three years or so later. He retired from Seattle P.D. and they moved first to the Chehalis area and then later on to Prescott. I met up

with Gary when I did a signing at the library in Sedona several years back, and I saw him again a year ago in March when I did an event for the Prescott Public Library where he was a faithful volunteer. In fact, it was the head of the library who wrote to me this morning to tell me what had happened.

I'm not surprised that the family asked for remembrances to go to the Prescott Public Library. Gary Flynn was always about helping others, and he certainly helped me. Thank you, Gary. RIP.

An Extra Full Moon?

Friday, May 21, 2010

My daughter who works at a call center assures me that as the full moon approaches, e-mails and phone calls coming into her department become stranger and stranger. If my own e-mail this week is any indication, the full moon must be arriving far sooner than the calendar indicates.

Let's begin with the woman who took me to task for the R-ratedness of the sex scenes in *Until Proven Guilty*. It's true. My character did manage to get lucky in that first book, but that was followed by a long dry spell for the poor guy. The truth is, sex happens in real life and occasionally in my books. I don't put those scenes in because some editor told me I had to. Editors aren't in the habit of passing out book recipes or, at least, I've never been given one. In Lee Childs's books his hero, Jack Reacher, occasionally gets lucky in the midst of gun battles. I find those episodes to be a little unrealistic, but I have not sat down at my computer to send Lee Childs an e-mal. (That's not a typo, by the way. An e-mal is an e-mail sent with content that is mostly . . . well . . . malicious.) My opinion about how Lee Childs writes his books doesn't impinge on how HE writes his books! If I think it's unlikely that a pair of characters would be able to maintain a romantic interlude in the midst of a gun battle, I can just SKIP THAT PART. I don't have to read it. And I won't be sending him an outraged e-mal about it, either.

I'm currently reading a book about a guy working at for a dictionary company tracking down new words and defining them. Somehow I'm sitting here hoping that the term e-mal will make it into common usage.

So back to this week's collection of e-mals. J.P. Beaumont works for a fictional department headed by a fictional Attorney General. This department was given the unfortunate moniker, the Special Homicide Investigation Team. If you shorten that down to an acronym, you suddenly see why the name is unfortunate. It's also a long-standing joke for all the long suffering fictional investigators who work there. This week I received an outraged e-mal telling me that my use of that _ _ _ _ acronym indicates I am really a very lazy writer. I'm not sure how one turns into the other. How does writing two books a year make me lazy? I suspect it's far more likely that the author of the e-mal in question has a somewhat limited sense of humor because he doesn't approve of Beau's boss's name, either. Harry Ignatius Ball is affectionately referred to by those who work for him as Harry I. Ball. That fictional character, by the way, was named after

one of my husband's distant relatives. Besides, if I didn't get to put a little fun in my books now and then, writing two books a year would be way too hard, even for someone who's lazy.

But the capper on the e-mal jug, so to speak, came from the guy who took me to task for mentioning the Holocaust in my book *Lying in Wait*. He probably goes searching for the use of this word on the Internet so he'll most likely be back in touch. His position is that the Holocaust never happened and that I'm pretty much delusional for even mentioning it. The story I put in the book is a fictional one based on the recollections of a man named Thomas Blatt who, along with his family, was sent to Sobibor in Poland where it was his job to removed gold fillings from gas chamber victims' mouths. Sobibor was a death camp. Mr. Blatt, along with several other teenaged boys, managed to escape; Mr. Blatt's family members did not. Once Mr. Blatt came to the US, he dedicated the remainder of his life to making sure those death camp deaths were not forgotten. My correspondent claimed that since there is no official autopsy" evidence of any of the death camp victims, that they did not exist--those deaths didn't happen. I wrote back and explained my connection to Mr. Blatt. My correspondent sent me a second e-mal telling me that "eye witness accounts are unreliable."

Well, I'm sorry. I'm relying on that one. Thomas Blatt's story is one I felt honored to tell. If you happen to agree with my correspondent, please don't bother sending me an e-mal to that effect. It isn't going to change my mind.

Now when do we expect that full moon?

Memorial Day Weekend 2010

Friday, May 28, 2010

It's Friday. It's raining "pitchforks and hammer handles" as my mother used to say. This is hardly a surprise. After all, it's Memorial Day Weekend. The sun may peek out for a time on Sunday, but we're not holding our breath. Summer around here generally doesn't turn up until after the last Seattle rainstorm drowns out the Fourth of July fireworks.

This week our call center daughter dealt with a man who was beyond irate because his patio furniture delivery might not make it in time for Memorial Day which, according to him, would pretty much be the end of the world. Our daughter, the widow of a man who was active duty Coast Guard when he died four years ago, managed to keep her cool. She didn't tell her belligerent customer that Memorial Day is about something other than back yard barbecues and picnics. The sacrifices made by the men and women who serve this country faithfully in the military deserve to be remembered.

So today's blog update is about a member of the greatest generation--Mac McAdams. Mr. McAdams was the father of Pat Hall, my best friend from fourth grade on. I'm sure he had a first name. I don't know it. If you were a kid growing up in the fifties, your

friends' parents had no other name besides Mr. and Mrs. I know Mrs. McAdams (Thelma) called him Mac, so I'm going to stick with that or with Mr.

Mr. McAdams worked for Phelps Dodge in Bisbee's open pit mine. At least, that's how I remember it, but he might have worked underground, too. He came home from work every day, freshly showered, wearing a spiffily starched and ironed khaki shirt and pants. Those pants always had a definite crease that Thelma ironed into them every wash day. They ate dinner about the time he got home from work--4:30 or so--which cut into Pat's and my social time since my family's dinner hour was usually around six.

Mac McAdams was not a happy-go-lucky kind of guy. Morose? Yes. Strict? Yes. I never heard him laugh, but I also never heard him raise his voice. For most of the time we were growing up I was scared of him. He seemed to be of the "children should be seen but not heard" school of parenting, and we complied. I probably would have continued being scared if I hadn't walked in on him one time and heard him talking baby talk to their pet parakeet--Tweetie Pie, if I remember correctly. After that, I realized that he wasn't nearly as tough as he wanted everyone to believe.

Time passed. Pat and I drifted apart for a few years. Mac retired from PD. He had bouts with cancer. He and Thelma were in a terrible car wreck during an ice storm in El Paso. The details on all this escape me because Pat and I weren't particularly close at the time Mac died. Thelma went on to remarry and then, eventually, lost her second husband as well. By the time she went to live with Pat in Florida, Pat and I were close again. I went for a visit, and while we were there, Thelma explained that Mac hit the beaches in Normandy on D-Day + 1. He was also part of the Battle of the Bulge. Thelma told us that he went away to the war one way and came back a changed man who never talked about his war time experiences to her or to anyone else.

Did Mr. McAdams suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder? I'm sure he did, but he did so quietly--working at his job and faithfully raising his family. I want to take this opportunity to say thank you to him and to all the others like him--including the one in Phoenix who wrote to me this morning and reminded me that it was time for me to write another blog update. (Here it is, Otto. This one's for you.)

Oh, and if you happen to read the Joanna Brady books, you'll encounter Eleanor Lathrop Winfield's home on Campbell Avenue, the place where Joanna Brady grew up and where her mother still lives. I used Mr. and Mrs. McAdams's home as the model for that because, when I was growing up, that was my home away from home.

Putting their place in my books is a way of saying thank you for that, too.

Sunny Saturday in JUNE

Saturday, June 5, 2010

It just dawned on me that it's Saturday morning and I have yet to write this week's blog update. And looking outside, it appears this might possibly be one of those very rare days in June--a sunny Saturday in the Pacific Northwest. So with the grandkids due this afternoon, I'd best turn my mind and fingers to the keyboard. The problem with doing that is that there's not a lot to write about because that's what I've been doing this week -- writing.

I played two rounds of golf this week by sneaking out to the course when it wasn't raining, but most of the rest of the time I've been working on a book. More like staring at the screen.

There's a song by Iris DeMent that speaks to what writers do:

"Sweet is the melody, so hard to come by
So hard to make every note bend just right
You lay down the hours and leave not one trace
But a tune for the dancing is there in its place."

That what writing is like. I lay down the hours. Generally speaking it takes six hundred hours to write a book--three hundred hours of thinking and three hundred hours of typing. This week has been long on thinking. It's time for the banana peel and time to get all the people to the right place at the right time for the crashing climax.

In our house I'm generally not in charge of the clickers and for good reason. My chair is evidently just slightly out of kilter as far as accessing the controls is concerned. When I try to fast forward, I usually overshoot the commercial and am half way through the next segment of the program before I get it stopped again. Then, when I try to reverse course, I'll hit the slow-mo option where the figures on the screen move one . . . very . . . slow . . . image. . . . at . . . a . . . time. I'm sure you get the picture. What usually happens is that Bill picks up his clicker and fixes the problem. You may be asking yourself,

"Why doesn't she just move her chair?" Answer: Because this is Seattle and my chair is next to the fireplace! Ten months out of the year that's a good thing.

But that's how my cast of characters have been acting all week long. They've been in slow motion--one step forward; one step back.

So now I'm sitting here with the computer on my lap. The fireplace is on. (Just because it's sunny doesn't mean it's WARM!) I'm writing these words, but the characters are trying to sneak in around the edges of my brain. That means I'd better turn this off and go pay attention to them because it turns out I can't write more than one thing at a time.

Little By Little the Job Gets Done!

Friday, June 11, 2010

I'm ready for summer! Beaumont 20, due out in the summer of 2011, is in the can. It's a long way from finished because we're just now starting the long and winding road called editing, but it's done. I read the next to last chapter just a few minutes ago, and it gave me goosebumps. That's a good sign. It means the story worked. At least it worked for me.

It's unusual for me to write a whole book without giving it a name. It's sort of like the old days when people didn't know what kind of a baby they were having until said baby put in his or her appearance. We'll be putting on our "name-the-book" hats very soon, and I'm convinced this literary baby will have a proper name one the first page of the manuscript by the time it goes zooming over the Internet to land in New York. Let me say one more time and for the record how grateful I am that we don't have to PRINT the manuscript in order to submit it.

I seem to remember mentioning starting work on this book in a blog entry. That was right around the end of March, shortly after I had completed Fatal Error, Ali # 6. We took a week and the long way around to drive back to Seattle from Arizona. We might have actually stopped to see some sights if it hadn't been raining and snowing and hailing most of the way. (It's also been raining like crazy since we got home, but here we pretty much expect it.) In other words, with time off for the drive, this book (all 98,186 words of it, but who's counting?) has been written in a little over two months--all of April, all of May, and a hint of June.

No, this is not a record. That still belongs to Beaumont # 11, Failure to Appear, which was written from a dead stop in SIX WEEKS!! It was the middle of March (What is it about the Ides of March?) and I was working on a Joanna Brady book that was due to be in New York by May 1. That's when my then editor called to say that they'd just had a marketing meeting and had decided that instead of a Joanna book they wanted a Beaumont book, but they still needed it by the same deadline.

When you are toiling in the lowly literary landscape of original paperbacks, you don't tell your editor to go jump in the lake and you don't scream into the phone with the entirely understandable question of, "Are you NUTS?" No, you put your shoulder to the wheel, your nose to the grindstone, your fingers on the keyboard (Feel free to imagine the required physical contortions for that!) and you go to work. Bill claims that I never slept during that six weeks. He was still "working outside the home," at they say. I would be up working when he went to bed and back up working when he woke up. The problem with writing that book--as well as with writing this one--is that it's pretty darned tough to go to sleep when the characters are still up at all hours, marching around in your head, and telling you stuff about the story.

So what am I going to do on my first day off? It's still much too wet to golf, so I'm going to sit in front of the fireplace and read a book--somebody else's book. I'm going to

make arrangements to get a haircut and I may even splurge on a pedicure! Oh, yes, and play with the grandkids. We've turned on the heater in the pool. It's cold enough right this minute that steam is rising from the pool's surface, but the weatherman claims it'll be sunny tomorrow.

He'd better be right. As I said before, I'm READY for some summer.

The Book Club Dilemma

Saturday, June 19, 2010

When it comes to book clubs, I have a checkered past. My first encounter with book clubs came in 1990 when *Hour of the Hunter*, the first Walker Family book, came out in hardback. I was invited to speak at the Foremother's Luncheon that celebrated the 100th Anniversary of the establishment of the Everett Book Clubs. The room was jam packed with women who loved books and who loved each other, and I must confess that for me an unexpected side effect of being there was a hopeless case of . . . jealousy. I had spent most of my adult life, knocking back and forth on the I-5 corridor, living in both Arizona and Washington. As a rolling stone, working "outside the home," raising kids, and dealing with a difficult first marriage and a rewarding but complicated second one, I never had the opportunity that those book club women in Everett had. They had been reading books together, some of them for decades. Their book club membership afforded them a coterie of friends that lasted from the time of first marriages and on through grand-motherhood. I had one friend like that, someone I had known from fourth grade on, but she was living in Florida and I was living in Washington. Not much chance of our getting together socially once a month to chat and discuss books.

So when I went to the Foremother's Luncheon, it was very clear to me that the women in the room, unlike me, had friends they had been able to count on through the years. And, it turns out, one of the women from that luncheon ended up becoming a good friend.

But in the twenty years between then and now, I've had some challenging situations with book clubs. Most of the time, I've been subjected to the type of comments that can most easily be summed up as follows: "Our book club doesn't read mysteries. . . although I'm sure yours are fine." How do you spell GRRR? In other words, "Our book club only reads IMPORTANT books or LITERARY FICTION," both of which I translate to mean the literary equivalent of Castor Oil. Maybe the books they read aren't fun or easy to swallow, but THEY'RE GOOD FOR YOU! As I was typing that, I couldn't help but remember something the late, great Tony Hillerman said to me once: Literary fiction is where not much happens to people you don't like very much." To which I might add a heartfelt AMEN!

I'm a storyteller. I write to entertain. I write to transport people to somewhere else. I write to make people laugh and occasionally cry. I will be the first to admit that my books are NOT IMPORTANT. Fun, yes? Easy to read? I think so. The lady who sent

me my all time favorite fan letter said: "I have read every book you have wrote. I have loved every book you have wrote." This was a woman who wasn't a grammatical genius unlike the woman who wrote last week complaining about my comma usage, but she read my books. All of them. And the stories were simple enough and the language straightforward enough that even people like her, ones who wouldn't know how to diagram a sentence on a bet, could read and enjoy them.

But I digress. That's one of the things I love about writing this blog. I can digress all I want, and no one tells me I can't.

So back to the book club issue. A couple of years ago, a representative from a book club wrote to me. She said her book club was thinking about reading one of my books and she wondered where she could get the Cliff Notes. EXCUSE ME! THE CLIFF NOTES?? Are you kidding? I wrote back and told her that, as a writer of genre fiction, it didn't seem likely that anyone would ever see fit to create a set of Cliff Notes for one of my books. After all, aren't those for the classics? Yes, I've been out in the literary world since the 1980s, but I don't think that gives me "classic" status. I doubt members of her particular book club ever read one of my books. At least, if they did, they didn't let me know.

Last night, however, someone from a book club got me. She explained that her book club in Tucson was reading *Hour of the Hunter*, and wanted to know where could she find a list of discussion questions. I have to admit at this point that, of all my books, *Hour of the Hunter* is my personal favorite. It's darker than my other books--as are all the Walker Family books--but they grew out of a dark time in 1970 when my first husband and I spent sixty days being stalked by a serial killer. For a mystery writer I would have had to be totally NUTS to ignore that opportunity. And as someone who wasn't allowed in the Creative Writing program at the University of Arizona in 1964, it was REALLY rewarding to write a book where the crazed killer turned out to be a former professor of Creative Writing from the University of Arizona!

At the time I wrote *Hour of the Hunter*, I had written nine J. P. Beaumont books. They're all linear, told in Beau's first person narrative from beginning to end. HOTH was told through five or six different points of view with an elastic time line that spanned seventy or so years and included many of the stories and legends I learned as a storyteller during the five years I was a K-12 librarian on the reservation. Picking up and dropping story lines and then going on through some other character's point of view was more like French braiding a book than it was writing it, and it was fun--almost like going on vacation.

Was HOTH literary? No. Definitely not, but I'm guessing that people who read that book learn things about the American Southwest that they never knew before. For instance, when Indian kids had to travel by train from the reservation near Tucson to Phoenix Indian School, they had to ride on top of the cars because Indians weren't allowed inside the cars.

I did send off a couple of discussion questions to the lady who wrote to me last night. It turns out that would be another discussion question I would add: When you were reading this book, what did you learn about Arizona that you never knew before?

Queen of the Night, Walker Family number 4 is coming out on July 27. I don't think it's quite as dark as the other three, but I have it on good authority that it's not literary, either. After all, how could it be? It's "genre fiction."

The Summer That Never Was

Sunday, June 27, 2010

Yesterday I sent the manuscript for Beaumont # 20 to my editor. That means that I have a few days with no editing or writing responsibilities. Well, other than writing a blog update that is.

And yesterday we thought summer was here. There was sun. We took a dip in the pool. We had a barbecue and actually needed the umbrella for shade. Alas, the clouds were back this morning. What started out as a pleasantly overcast day for golf turned more and more drippy. The rain came down and my score went up into the stratosphere. So now we're home, sitting in front of the fire, and starting to thaw out. Such is the Pacific Northwest Summer of 2010.

So what am I doing on my vacation? I'm reading. That's what summers have always been for as far as I'm concerned--reading.

When I was growing up in Bisbee, Arizona, the school libraries were open one day a week. We hauled books back and forth in our Radio Flyer Wagon. Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, Albert Payson Terhune, and Zane Grey. Albert Payson Terhune wrote a whole series of books about his summer home in New Jersey called Sunnybank which was inhabited by the Master and the Mistress and any number of pedigreed collies. Each of Terhune's books centered on one dog in particular: Lad, a Dog; Wolf; Lad of Sunnybank; Bruce; Buff: A Collie; and Grey Dawn. I'm sure there were plenty of others, but those are the ones I remember. I seem to recall that Lad in particular loved to hide out in his cave under the piano. Now that we have a baby grand in our living room, I'm a little disappointed that Daphne, our aging golden, has no interest in hiding out there.

But back to reading. I devoured books all summer long in Bisbee. And once I was in college and later when I was teaching, I still did my recreational reading mostly in the summers. Then I became a librarian. Reading books so I'd know what books to recommend to individual kids was part of my job. No problem with that!!

When I first started writing, I worried about cross pollination and I didn't read anyone else's books for a while for fear of losing my own voice. Forty plus books into the program I no longer worry about that. What I need, though, are chances to read with a clear conscience, when my own characters aren't tugging insistently on my mental faculties and demanding that I pay attention to them. Now happens to be one of those

times. As a result, today I'll be going back to the Girl who Kicked the Hornet's Nest. I read the first two books in this series, and I'm enjoying this one as well.

Which reminds me of one more thing. On several occasions I've heard from wannabe writers who say right off that they're busily writing a novel, even though they don't read them. Huh??? To my knowledge, none of those non-reading would-be writers has ever been published. Or, if they have, they haven't bothered to let me know.

And when parents write to me asking how they should go about encouraging their son/daughter who wants to be a writer? I tell them that the very FIRST thing is to see to it that they become readers.

Happy reading.

Living Life In Reverse

Saturday, July 3, 2010

I've spent the last several days living my life in reverse. I've been working on creating PDFs of the older blogs. Once blogs are posted, they're posted. Whatever typos are there when Bill presses send remain for the duration because reposting is a no-no. The only way to fix the typos is to find them, so I've been reading my auto-biography backwards, starting in 2006 and moving forward, week by week, month by month. Once they're in PDF format they should be easily searchable.

What am I finding out? Some of them are funny. The mammogram rant still tickles my funny bone. And the ones about losing our son-in-law made me cry. So did the ones about losing Aggie. What I wrote in both those instances was what I really felt.

My life reminds me of the lines on an EKG graph--periods of low level activity combined with sharp spikes of hyper-activity--writing/touring; writing/touring; writing/touring as regular as clockwork. Notes to self: Do not talk about the "work" of touring anymore. You've done that. Just keep your broken fingernail complaints to yourself. Do not gripe about having to sleep in different beds. A lot of people would LOVE to have that problem. Come to think of it, a lot of people would like to have any bed at all. In a word. Stop whining!!!

There are lots of references about my folks. I can't help it. My parents are the cornerstone of my life. And there are lots of references to Bisbee. Ditto. Those are all part of my history. I'm keeping them, and I'll probably keep writing about them.

The e-mails that come and go show up in the post because, for much of my year, that's my interaction with the rest of the world. This morning I have a note from someone in Newfoundland. I haven't answered it yet because I haven't finished writing this. One thing at a time.

In the process of reading I'm seeing the patterns of what I've put in, and I'm also noticing what I've left out.

So here's a window on our lives for the last couple of weeks. On Father's Day after breakfast, Bill had a "drug interaction" (Note to readers: Hot coffee and Niacin DO NOT MIX!) He sat down in the living room, complaining of having a hot flash and then fainted dead away. In his chair. It's a pose he strikes occasionally to tease us, but this time, when his iPad fell to the floor, his two daughters and I knew it wasn't a joke and sprang into action. Jeanne T. had her cell phone out and was dialing 9-1-1 while she was still coming up out of her chair. I crossed the living room in two steps and started whacking him on the chest. Cindy did the same thing to his face. As the doctor asked me later, "Did anyone take his pulse?" No, we were too busy smacking him. And, Colt wanted to know, "Why are they hitting Grandpa?" Answer: TO GET HIS ATTENTION!!!

Eventually and long before the medics showed up, he came around. We did the stroke test--smile; talk, stick out your tongue. He did all three with no problem and complained because we were "yelling" at him. I guess we were!

The medics arrived, took his vitals, said he was "probably okay" but packed him off to the hospital to be checked out anyway. And he was fine. Home later that afternoon. Now you can believe he's taking his niacin with COLD water. But it was scary. Got our attention. Made us realize that life is tenuous.

We are people of a certain age. We take a collection of pills. My job is to sort them into our individual plastic medication containers, which are marked on the front with our initials. On Wednesday of that week, we ran out of pre-sorted pills, so on Wednesday afternoon, I pulled out the containers and sorted the pills into them. (I do that two weeks at a time and it's a task that takes a good forty-five minutes.) It's complicated by the fact that some of the medications aren't administered in the same amounts every day.)

A propensity for DVTs (deep vein thrombosis) runs in my family. My maternal grandmother died of a blood clot that went to her lungs. My mother wore special support stockings for thirty years. I had my first DVT in 1996. That was considered a one-off. The second one happened about two years ago, and that one got our attention, and my doctor's attention, too. Since then I've been on blood thinners, and since in its natural state, my blood is evidently the consistency of J-E-L-L-O™, I take what for anyone else would be considered a lethal dose.

And now I'm sure you know where this is going.

Thursday morning, our Majordomo laid out our breakfast, complete with individual egg cups containing our individual pills. Bill got to the table first and swallowed his. I held my egg cup up to my lips. There, staring me in the face in green and orange splendor, was Bill's Flomax. I had put one set of pills in the wrong container one week container. We all looked at the label on the pill container and took it as the gospel. I didn't take

Bill's pills but he had taken mine, complete with a huge dose of warfarin which outside the medical community, goes by another name--rat poison!)

Talk about an anxiety attack! I was sure I had killed him. I could already hear the 48 Hours intro. "At the end of a tree lined drive in Bellevue sits the home of a well-known mystery writer. When the 9-1-1 call came in, it was an address emergency personnel had visited before." And the headlines. "Mystery Writer Claims poisoning 'accidental.' Sure. Right. With no one else's fingerprints on all those individual pills? When we switched over to Medicare, I ended up having a mis-shipment of three month supplies of the various sizes of blood thinning tablets. I figure I'll use them up eventually, but any CSI worth his salt would have to ask the question, "Why does she have a warehouse of blood thinners in her bedroom closet?" What went through my mind in that instant was that that dame on TruTV, the one who says, "Jail? I don't LIKE jail!"

So we called the doctor for the second time that week. I was NOT reassured when the receptionist put me right through to what she called "the triage nurse." Triage is not a word you want to hear over the phone. We got a prescription for Vitamin K. We plugged him full of a bale of spinach (one of those immense containers from Costco), and he's fine. His INRs are just where they're supposed to be.

Pardon me if I say, that's enough excitement for one week. My doctor's office had a pharmacy call me, ones that will do the sorting for us and put them in little bubble packs and designate mornings or evenings. Sounds like a good idea to me.

Last night, my daughter and grandson were here. I was going to give Bill his niacin. He takes it in the evening now with something cold. I asked my daughter to hand me his egg cup and the pill bottle. She did so--but only with a napkin between her fingers and the bottle. She's a single mother with a four year old. If anything goes wrong, she doesn't want to go to jail, either.

To quote the bard. All's well that ends well!

All's Well That Ends Well

Monday, July 5, 2010

Okay, so I tried living life in reverse, and I didn't like it. I've been working on the blog updates so we could turn them into PDF files. I started at the bottom and worked my way forward. That seemed logical enough, and it worked fine as long as I wasn't reading them. But when I started trying to proofread them, I went . . . well . . . nuts. I would be reading about ending a tour and then I would be reading about starting the same tour. Not a good idea. Confusing. Crazy-making. For people who have been reading along all the time, that may be fine. For people who want to read my mini-autobiography? Not so much.

So now we've turned them around. File by file. That means that now the blog archives will start at the beginning of each year and go to the end. If for some reason you want

to PRINT one of the files, it's not going to work very well. Contact me and I'll send a printable copy of that entry.

In our family, there was only one comic book that passed the Evie Busk acceptable reading list--Little Lulu. The things I remember about that are several. 1: Lulu's good pal was named Tubby. 2: Tubby had a club house with a NO GIRLS ALLOWED sign on it. 3: Little Lulu kept a diary and started each entry with Dear Diary.

So that's what the blog is like--Little Lulu's Dear Diary, except it's a lot more public.

Looking at these entries in hindsight, several things jump out at me. Time has passed; life has changed.

I clearly bought into the myth about Tiger Wood being the ultimate golfing gentleman. Tiger can still play golf, but as far as I'm concerned, he's fallen from grace in a big way. Too bad!

Lewis Hamilton? He won more Formula 1 races last year than he's winning this year. He may be having too much fun and that could be getting in the way of his ability to concentrate. The jury is still out on whether he'll be able to avoid a duplicating Tiger Woods's pratfall.

One of the blogs talked about all the things I said I would never do and then ended up doing in spite of myself--like getting married again, owning a boat, living in Bellevue, and playing golf. Having a Facebook page now needs to be added to the list. Somewhere along the blogging way I said I would never have a Facebook page, but now I do. Reminder to self: Never say never.

My best friend is coming to visit on Wednesday. She'll be here for a week. We'll have fun, including a day long spa day. Last time she came to see us, it was the middle of the Great Seattle Blizzard of '08. This should be a lot different.

It rained for the Fourth of July as expected, but today's the Fifth. I expected summer to be here today.

It isn't.

How Do You Say You're Sorry?

Sunday, July 11, 2010

A childhood best friend is visiting from Florida this week. We've had great fun together: Thursday was a spa day followed by dinner out. Yesterday we had a comical day of golf in the morning followed by a long dinner spent reminiscing with one of our grade school classmates who happened to be in town at the same time. This afternoon we squandered hours in the swimming pool and then had nachos for dinner. In other words, this has been an altogether uncomplicated happy time.

Then tonight I received a phone call. One of our friends has now lost a second son to suicide, years after she lost his older brother the same way. The call notifying us came from a mutual friend.

The word "sorry" doesn't come close to conveying what I want to say to this caring, loving mother. She's a kind, gentle cheerful person who was widowed long before her first son took his own life. The heartbreak of this additional tragedy seems too much for her to bear.

I know none of the details and the truth is, the details are none of my business. I just want to reach out to her, hug her, and tell her that it's not her fault.

I sent her an e-mail tonight, saying I was sorry to hear the news, but that word seems so empty. And frivolous.

My friend's heart is broken, and so is mine.

How do you say, "I was wrong?"

Friday, July 16, 2010

Just like that. I was. And thankfully so.

Last week I posted a blog about a friend of mine losing a second son to suicide. I sent her an e-mail and then waited to hear when the services would be. I bought a proper sympathy card. I checked the obituary columns in the newspaper. I was reluctant to bother her by phone during what I was sure had to be an incredibly tough time.

Then, on Wednesday, I received an e-mail from her that said: "Sorry for what?" Because it turns out, this was a case of mistaken identity. You could say that was an e-mail that: A: Gave me goosebumps. And B: Made me joyful.

It turns out the mutual friend who contacted me originally knew I knew her but didn't know her personally. (Sorry for all those pronouns missing their antecedents, but I'm not going to put all those names in the paper. For obvious reasons.) And the man who reported the incident to the person who called me, got his wires crossed because he knew the grieving parents were friends of his wife but he got the names confused.

So there's another set of grieving parents out there, dealing with the appalling loss of their son. The only good thing about that is that at least they have someone in their circle of acquaintance who knows all too well about the tough path they're walking and who will, no doubt, be there to give them a helping hand.

So thank you to the people who wrote to me this week and sent along their condolences both to me and to the grieving parents. My sense of it is that the Man Upstairs knew the

proper recipients of those kind wishes the whole time. As far as He's concerned, there are NO wrong numbers!

The new book announcements for Queen of the Night went out last week. Of more than 9,000 addresses, five hundred or so bounced and thirty asked to be removed from the list. (They have been. Personally. By me.) If you expected to receive an announcement and didn't, you may be among the people whose addresses bounced. Please send me a new address. And, if you want a new book announcement, please let me know that, too. (jajance@jajance.com)

So this has been a week of keeping all the balls in the air. Yes, I had company and yes, we had fun, recalling the good old days at Greenway School and Bisbee High School, playing golf, visiting Snoqualmie Falls, and having a spa day. In stray moments, I worked on removing the bounces from the list. After my friend went home, I did the copy editing on Fatal Error, the Ali Reynolds book that is now due out February 4 rather than January 4. (Don't ask. I have no idea why they changed the publication date, but they did.) I also did the first two interviews for the book tour. Today I need to answer a whole flock of snail mail from people who have sent a SASE so I can send them an autographed book mark. Next week there will be more interviews for Queen of the Night at the same time I'll be doing the editorial letter changes for the next Beaumont. So, yes, it's a busy time--a very busy time.

On July 27, I'll be out on the road speaking in public about a book that is two whole books away from both my fingertips and my little gray cells. Right this minute, I'm totally in touch with Ali. By this time next week, Beaumont will be front and center in my head. By the time I do the first appearance for Queen of the Night, some of my readers--ones who routinely show up at events--will have already read it. The characters and events in the new Walker Family book will be far fresher in their minds than in mine.

So give me a break. If you ask me a question about the new book and I give you a blank look, don't be surprised.

It's not because I didn't write THAT book; it's because I wrote them ALL!

Preparing to Exit the Bubble

Wednesday, July 21, 2010

When I'm writing--seriously writing--I tend to exist inside the confines of a bubble. I don't have a desk. I have a comfortable chair in our family room, a laptop, and a lap. (Unlike my husband who is somehow missing six inches or so in the length of his thighs, my thighs are plenty long enough to hold a any laptop known to man, including my old dual floppy Toshiba that weighed approximately fifteen pounds and burned itself up inside a briefcase when we finally put it out to pasture.) Okay, I can see this is a blog update that is NOT going to stay on track--a tangent blog update as it were.

My writing bubble extends as far as the "occasional" table on my right which holds my ever-present coffee cup and an emery board. (I don't know why keyboarding is so tough on fingernails but it is.) The end table on my left is one of those Levenger desk thingee's that's supposed to slip under your couch. Despite our interior designer's best efforts to banish these to our basement--which we don't have--or to our garage--which we do--two of them remain in this room. The one on Bill's side of the room once held his complete deck of remotes. That has now been reduced to one remote which is purported to do everything, and it does--for him. Not for me. So the disapproved and unsightly Levenger table on MY side of the room holds a collection of snail mail--which I must answer soon; an empty prescription bottle--which I must fill soon; and my disapproved clicker--the old one--which I use to change channels because I can't get the new one to do stuff the old one will.

Okay. So this is my bubble. Three times a week, weather permitting, we go out to play golf. Last year we played golf from April to July and never got wet. This summer we've played and never been dry or warm with the exception of two days--one when my friend from Florida was here and the other today. Every other time, I've worn a jacket and needed it. And come home and turned on the fireplace to warm up afterwards.

So please forgive me if, while you've all been out in the rest of the world struggling through record-breaking heat in June and July, we've been basking in . . . well . . . record-breaking cold! And whining about being cold--ATL. (In our family, ATL stands for At Tedious Length.) All I can say is, you're about to get even. I finished writing the one book, and I've edited another. And the next set of editing is on its way. Incidentally, the editing must be completed and on its way back to New York by Opening Day on July 27 (No, I'm NOT talking about Opening Day of Yachting Season. That happens in May. It was cold and rainy for that this year as it usually is.)

The opening day is for the Queen of the Night tour which starts next Tuesday and lasts for the better part of three weeks.

So now it's time to start thinking about packing. To that end, I looked at the weather in the REST OF THE COUNTRY. Imagine my surprise! It's only been cold here and nowhere else. And next week, all of you who have been suffering in the heat will have your revenge. I'm going to have to venture out of the bubble and go on a book tour.

Wait a minute. I'll be in Tucson and Phoenix in AUGUST? Whose bright idea as that?

Now let's all sit back and hum a few bars of "Please, Mr. Custer. I don't wanna go!"

See you on the signing trail.

My Father Had “aids”, and I Do Too

Monday, July 26, 2010

When my parents were well into their eighties, my father woke up one Wednesday morning and told my mother that he had a pain in his side and that he should probably go see the doctor who was in Sierra Vista, thirty miles away. The problem with this plan had to do with it being a Wednesday morning--the morning my mother had a standing appointment to have her hair done. Fortunately, Carol was able to work my mother in a few minutes early. Then off to Sierra Vista my parents went in their Buick with my father at the wheel. At the hospital the doctor who removed my father's inflamed appendix said they had arrived just in time since, in another thirty minutes, it would have ruptured.

So let's just say it was a pretty dire situation. But just because my father was verging on his death bed didn't mean he lost his sense of humor. When the admitting clerk at the hospital's reception desk asked him if he had AIDS, he responded with a resounding affirmative and then added, pointing at his glasses, "I have seeing aids, hearing aids, and chewing aids." The clerk almost fell out of her chair laughing. So did my mother.

Gramps was hospitalized for several days. The first day, for the surgery, he was knocked out, but he was fine. The second day, he had the beginnings of a fierce headache. By the third day his head hurt way worse than his appendix had. That was when my mother finally tumbled to the problem. The cooks in the cafeteria had been slipping the poor guy DECAF!! She went out and bought him a cup of coffee, the REAL stuff, from a vending machine. Once he drank that, my father was cured. (I may have mentioned before that my mother was a very smart woman.)

You might wonder why I'm writing about this right now. Here's the reason: This week I was fitted for my second set of aids. The first set--a combination of glasses and Lasik--I already have, so this would be aids of the hearing variety--two of them.

Several years ago, in a crowded restaurant, I heard someone remark about there being camels in Virginia. I was so astonished that I repeated what I thought he said--loud enough for ALL to hear. "You mean they have camels in Virginia?" The man turned to me in equal astonishment and said very carefully, "I left my CAMERA in Virginia."

Mystery solved, but the hilarity didn't end there. People were still laughing about it hours later when we left the restaurant, and my kids have seen to it that I've lived with a world of Camels in Virginia jokes ever since. The topper came last year when my daughter and grandson were visiting in Virginia. They actually took a four hour ride to a petting zoo so I could have a picture of my grandson RIDING one of those CAMELS IN VIRGINIA.

But I've finally admitted defeat and come to the water or to my senses, depending on your point of view. My husband was tired of my always asking him to turn up the volume on the TV set.

My aids arrived on Friday. The grandkids came to visit yesterday. I was AMAZED at how noisy they were. I never knew that before.

Wait a minute, do these things have an off switch?

And whatever you do, HOLD THE DECAF!!!

Tales from the Trail, the Oregon Trail, that is.

Friday, July 30, 2010

It's Thursday, right around noon on Day Three of what we're calling our Mountain Time Zone tour. Not that we're on Mountain Time yet, because we're still in Oregon. We just left Baker City where I dined in style on French Toast made the RIGHT way--no cinnamon in the batter; no powdered sugar sprinkled on top. No fruit compotes in sight, and with crisp bacon on the side. One of the hazards of staying in upscale hotels is that chefs feel morally obligated to put their own personal stamp on everything. This usually means that so many additions and corrections are made to French Toast that it's unrecognizable. So a Big YAY! to the Oregon Trail Diner in Baker City.

This is a driving tour with stops being two to three hundred miles apart. In the old days, I couldn't update from the tour itself because we had problems finding enough high speed connections to make it work. Now I can send these to our ITG (IT Gal) back home in Seattle and she can upload to her heart's content. So another Big YAY! to Kathy Schilb.

The events are going well. Last night's appearance in Kennewick had over 250 people in the audience. Unfortunately, the bookstore ran out of books early in the proceedings. Who knew that I was THAT popular in Kennewick!

During the signing portion of last night's event, a young woman handed me a copy of my book of poetry, *After the Fire*, and asked me to put a rather unusual inscription in it for her mother. It turned out that some time ago she wrote to me about her mother who had been devastated when her husband, the young woman's father died, in an automobile accident. I sent her a copy of the title poem from *After the Fire* and asked her to give it to her mother. Evidently, that small act of kindness helped bring her mother out of her despair and got her back into reading again. And, in case you're wondering, that's exactly why I answer my mail my own darned self.

Last night's hotel was . . . well . . . marginal. Our room was upstairs. There was no elevator and no bellman, and we are a traveling road show with all our office equipment and clothing and navigation equipment in tow. The desk clerk wasn't particularly concerned, but the manager on duty helped us drag up stuff upstairs. A Big YAY! to him. Once we were in the room, the AC was marginal as well. Who knew it would be over 100 degrees in Kennewick? We had a fan along, but in order to plug it in we had to move the TV cabinet--one of those HUGE TV cabinets. As for plugging in computers, iPads, etc? Fugetaboutit!

At Aunties in Spokane, the auditorium was being remodeled and wasn't usable. So a hundred fifty or so folks were assembled on folding chairs packed into the ground floor. (Think less leg space than Coach!) They had a lectern set up at the bottom of the staircase, but that meant that no one beyond row five could see me. I ended up giving the talk from step five of the staircase, clinging to the hand rail with one hand and the mic with the other. (Knowing my predilection for falling down stairs, Bill was in the far back of the audience, dying a thousand deaths!) Fortunately, I don't require a teleprompter or notes on my hands for speaking engagements, so it worked!

And speaking of dying a thousand deaths. Evidently some of my Facebook followers read the previous blog posting. They saw the headline that said "aids" and decided I was talking about "AIDS" There's a huge difference between lower case aids (of the hearing variety) and upper case AIDS. So if you happen to hear the rumor that J. A. Jance is on her deathbed, please put that rumor to rest. I'm alive and well and hearing better than I have for years except for last night in Kennewick when the battery in my one hearing aid ran out of juice in the middle of the talk. Not only was I left without the hearing aid, I had a totally custom-fit ear plug blocking everything. Last night for the signing with 250 people sanding in line, my "Camels in Virginia" were definitely alive and well and driving me NUTS!

Happy Trails!

Which reminds me. I heard they were auctioning off Roy Rogers's Trigger. Does anybody know how much he went for?

Tales from the Trail, Albuquerque

Wednesday, August 4, 2010

We're driving. Or rather, Bill is driving, and I'm in charge of communications systems--computer, air-card, cell phone, iPad, GPS, and power supply. That means my side of the car is a tangle of cords. We have two GPS systems up and running. One of them has become somewhat unreliable, and we can't afford to have her "recalculating" at the exact moment we need to make a critical turn.

In addition to electronics, I'm also in charge of supply lines. That means it's my responsibility to keep our traveling cups topped off with ice and water. Since Tuesday a week ago, we've covered the better part of 2437 miles (we're currently driving between Albuquerque and Flagstaff) doing signings and interviews along the way.

Book tours have their challenges. Looking at the schedule for Monday, we just shook our heads and headed out for an 8 AM radio followed by a 10 AM live TV appearance. (Not to be sexist but most men won't understand the implications of that bit of scheduling. It meant waking up at the crack of dawn and putting on full-dress, hi-def quality, makeup BEFORE the radio interview. Most of the time radio interviews can be done in sweats or PJs.) The moment the TV appearance was done, we drove close to

80 miles through heavy traffic to Fort Collins for a 12:30 library appearance. (We had come through Fort Collins on the day before through heavy WEEKEND traffic on our way from Boise.)

There were a hundred and thirty or so people in the room in the library where I gave my talk. The thermostat in the room hadn't been adjusted to account for the presence of that many warm and breathing bodies. My makeup went bye-bye in the course of the talk. When it was over and after I signed all the books, we headed back to Denver. More traffic.

I was parched. I was beyond parched, because I hadn't filled our water cups. I knew I had an hour long radio interview by phone scheduled for four and then a reception meet-and-greet at the Denver Public Library at 5:30. We got back to the hotel in time to order and drink a pitcher of iced tea before the interview. And by four o'clock, I was there, with my cell phone in hand, ready to rock and roll. When the call hadn't come in by four minutes past four, a light went off in my head.

And now we step away from the story for a brief lesson in Arizona history. After World War II, when the nation was deciding on the merits of keeping the wartime program of daylight savings time, a proposal for Arizona to do the same was put before the state legislature. One grumpy old legislator took to the floor and announced, "This is Arizona! We don't need any more *%&^!@ daylight!" Most everybody did the daylight savings bit with the exception of some parts of Indiana and all of Arizona!!

What that means is that during the winter, Arizona is on Mountain Standard time. During the summer Arizona is STILL on Mountain Standard Time which turns out to be the same as Pacific Daylight. If we time our snowbird comings and goings properly, we don't even have to change our clocks. But on book tours, this mysterious time zone aberration can cause all kinds of difficulties.

My schedule for Monday which said I would have a 4 PM interview with an Arizona radio station and a 5:30 reception now meant that I had 5:00 PM radio interview with half an hour of overlap between the two. So I raced into the bathroom, reapplied my makeup for the reception, and then rushed to the library where I hid out in the room and did the interview and then showed up late for the reception.

Yesterday morning we drove from Denver to Albuquerque. Bill drove. I was going to write a blog update, but I ended up answering 157 e-mails instead. Oh, and did two telephone interviews, one of which came through just as we came across Raton Pass and lost the signal mid-interview. We arrived in time to have "linner" (halfway between lunch and dinner) at Sadie's where the iced tea is always fresh, where the salsa is hot, and where sopapillas and honey arrive at the table right along with your entree. Then last night I spoke to 300 people and signed a bunch of books.

Back to the e-mails. Why do I read and answer them personally? Because I enjoy doing it. One message came from a woman in Tennessee who had taken Queen of the

Night along to the hospital with her to keep her company while she underwent a CT-scan for a possible brain tumor. She wrote to me later to say that she loved the book and her CT scan was clear. Hurrah! Another e-mail from someone who had driven a long way to Fort Collins made me laugh aloud. With her permission, I'm excerpting it below. Thank you, Judy Pape:

Last night I was having trouble sleeping. I decided to throw a load of laundry in the washer. Don was already asleep so I snuck into the bedroom and removed the clothes I wanted to wash. Remember that nice little seat on my walker? Well it has a canvas basket under it. I put all the laundry in and around the basket. When I got to the laundry room, I tossed all those clothes plus the clothes I already had in there. I added the soap and since most of it was white or light colored, I decided to put some bleach in it also. I always wait until the tub is full to add it, so sat down on the seat of my walker. One problem with that. I had not put the seat back down when I got the dirty clothes out of the canvas basket. I ended up falling all the way into the basket. Now here I am at one o'clock in the morning, stuck in my walker. I couldn't figure out where I could put my good arm to give me enough strength to pull myself out of there!!! I thought if I called Don to help me, he would be laughing so hard, he would be rolling around on the floor and no help at all.. He's done that before!!! It took me awhile to figure out how to get my good arm over the handlebars and onto the sink. Thank God!!! I could just see Don and I, being unloaded at the hospital because I was stuck in my walker and he was laughing so hard and couldn't stop!! I would have been very embarrassed. I don't know why it's always me getting into situations like this. Sometimes I think the main reason Don is still here after fifty years of marriage, is he's just always wondering what I'll be into next.

So that's what we do on tour. We meet people. I tell them my stories; they tell me theirs.

Several years ago, a reporter from a newspaper in Phoenix followed me around for the better part of a book tour day and said in an undertone to Bill, "How does someone HER age keep up the pace?" Well, it's four books later, and I'm still doing it. I take my vitamins and remember something my mother always used to say:

"It's a great life if you don't weaken."

Where Do Book Tours Come From.

Friday, August 6, 2010

Tour stops are arranged by the publishers' New York-based publicists, usually with input from the book reps who call on the book stores. That means that stores that don't sell enough books to have reps usually don't get signings. And signings with the chains are set up by their national signing person.

Most of the time publicists are limited by where they can get authors with commercial flights. In an airline world made up of hub cities that makes visiting some cities a lot harder than others. For instance, to get from Denver to Albuquerque is a five and a half hour drive. It's a one hour private jet flight, but without direct flights flying commercial can take all day because you have to fly in through Salt Lake or Dallas. That may not

still be the case, but that's how it was a few years ago. That's also why authors tend to . . . well . . . fly over those pesky fly-over states.

For the Queen of the Night tour, we made the decision to drive so we could visit cities that often don't get as many author visits as say LA or San Francisco. Walla Walla anyone? We had great crowds in Kennewick, Fort Collins, Boise, Salt Lake City, Albuquerque, Flagstaff, Sedona. The Denver Public Library event was less well attended than any of the others, and it may be that enough authors come through there that our stopping off there wasn't that big a deal. But in the other places it was, and it's been really gratifying. Gratifying but not easy. Driving a minimum of three hours a day and then doing one or two events (hour long presentations with no notes on my hands, no teleprompter and book signings afterward) are things that take their toll.

We're already talking about what's going to be on the Ali tour in February. That will be the dead of winter. I don't know where we'll be going or if we'll be flying or driving, but in either case the weather may have an impact on whatever is scheduled.

In between the organized tours, there may be other events. For instance in October, I'll be at the Southern Book Festival in Nashville. I ask people who send me a request to be added to my list to give me their city and state. That way, when I have events nearby I can let them know in advance.

After signings this week, several people mentioned my friendship with Marilyn Varming, a friend/fan whose death earlier this year was recounted in a blog update back in January of 2010. The small bits of conversation that come along in the course of signings or in e-mails after the fact are very dear to me. There was the Navajo man in Flagstaff who said his wife was in the hospital battling cancer, but he was taking his signed copy of QOTN to the hospital so he could read it to her. Several people told about reading through all the Joanna Brady books while they had cancer and were doing chemo or dialysis. And last night, I signed three books for a young native American man who has evidently had a troubled life but who wants to be a writer. And I have to tell you, signing those four books for someone named "Brandon Walker" for real gave me a shock.

Homeward Bound

Wednesday, August 11, 2010

This week the words from that old Simon and Garfunkel song Homeward Bound are close to my heart.

"Here I sit in a railroad station, got a ticket for my destination
I'm on a tour of one night stands, my suitcase and guitar in hand,
And every stop is neatly planned for a poet and a one man band."

Make that one woman band, but the one night stand part is true enough. On Monday morning, Bill and I broke up the Bill and Judy Traveling Road Show as he headed home

for Seattle, driving with our son for company, while I finished up the last two days of Tucson appearances. In one day under two weeks we drove over 3500 miles and did an astonishing number of events and interviews, as many as three a day in some instances. (Now I'm humming a few bars of "Breaking Up is Hard to Do.")

Hey, did I mention I'm tired?

So I'm not in a railroad station. I'm actually in one of my favorite places in the world, the Arizona Inn, where I have had the incredible luxury of staying in the same bed for several nights in a row and where I didn't have to jump out of bed first thing this morning, wash and iron my hair, and take off at the crack of dawn for the next event. I'm actually sitting in my robe, letting my hair air dry for a change, and enjoying another cup of coffee.

There are lots of moments to be remembered from this tour:

The man in Flagstaff who bought *Queen of the Night* and was planning to take it to the hospital room where his wife is battling breast cancer. He said she's a big fan of mine and he was going to read it to her. Nice man. Good husband.

The Tohono O'odham people, including Melinda Miguel, who came to my Tucson appearances, nodding and smiling at the stories I told. I didn't remember Melinda's whole name until later on (My camels in Virginia were evidently alive and well!) but I'm going to give myself a break on the name score since the last time I saw her was back in 1973. (And if you don't recognize the Camels in Virginia reference you need to check the blog about aids as opposed to AIDS!)

The fans and friends of Tony Hillerman who have thanked me for my dedication to him in *Queen of the Night*. No, I'm not comparing myself to Tony. That would be extremely presumptuous, but I like to think that the Walker Family books allow me to follow in his footsteps.

The kind people everywhere who have taken the time to shake my hand or have their picture taken with me while they tell me how much they love my books. Downright head-swelling!

Yesterday, at Costco in Tucson, I signed books for an hour and fifteen minutes without ever coming up for air. One woman took me at my word when I said, "leave no book unsigned." She showed up in her motorized cart with 28 books to be signed, and the folks from Costco helped get them opened, signed, and reloaded into her basket. Another set of very nice people!

Last Saturday in Phoenix we had a crisis when, on the way to a live TV appearance, we ran over a curb and broke the sidewall on one of our tires. We left the TV station at ten AM, knowing we had a noon time library event, a later afternoon library event, and needed to drive to Tucson that evening. Seventy-five miles-an-hour for a hundred miles

with a broken sidewall? I don't think so. So we called Tele-Aide, a different version of On-Star, and told the lady who answered about our situation, including the upcoming speech. By the time we finished breakfast, she had found the exact tire we needed at a Discount Tire shop eight blocks from the hotel. We went in there and sat in air-conditioned comfort while they put on the new tire. Then we made it to the noontime appearance with fifteen minutes to spare. Capitalism at work, ladies and gentlemen!!! (Oh, and because our damaged tires was covered under our road hazard guarantee, all we had to pay for was labor!)

And this morning in the quiet of my hotel room, I had a long talk with my daughter. Today is the fourth anniversary of her husband's death. If you look through the blog archives, you'll find that I started blogging about the time four years ago when we lost Jon to melanoma. So this is a tough day for her, and this morning, the best part of being on tour was being able to be a mom, and to be there for her, if only on the phone, at a time she needed me.

So that's what book tours are like, folks--the good, the bad, and the ugly. Now, I'm going to swill down the last cup of coffee, put on my face, finish ironing my hair, and head for the airport. But I'm going to make one important stop along the way--Barrio Anita and the Anita Street Market. Arguably the best flour tortillas in Tucson, but once I get four dozen of them home to Seattle in my carryon bag, they'll for sure be the BEST tortillas town.

Vaya con dios.

Another song.

Sorry.

The Eagle Has Landed

Sunday, August 15, 2010

The tour is over, and we're lucky to be alive. Bill put in 6000 miles in the car in just under three week. I'm 1,700 miles short of his total because I flew home from Tucson two days after he left for home driving. Bill did the driving while I did as many as three signing and/or speaking events a day. Did I mention we're tired? Beat. Beyond beat.

When I say we're lucky to be alive, I mean it. Last night, coming home from Silverdale, we came face-to-face with a wrong way driver, who got on the wrong side--our side--of the jersey barrier at Gorst. The guy was accelerating and was headed straight for us in his blue Ford pickup truck. Bill had the presence of mind to stop rather than trying to dodge out of the way, while I was yelling, "He's going to hit us," in rapid succession four times in a row. By being stationary, Bill reduced the momentum of any possible crash. By stopping, he also stopped the vehicles behind us, including a mini-van packed to the gills with little kids. At the last moment, the guy in the pickup dodged into what was, for him, the far left hand lane--and missed everybody, before finally pulling to a stop on the

shoulder of the road. When we reached the intersection where he had entered the highway, there was a whole group of men standing on the side of the road with their cell phones to their ears, no doubt calling 9-1-1.

It took a long time for us to calm down after that, and last night when we got in the express lanes to enter the Mount Baker Tunnel, I had a momentary panic attack. What if everybody didn't pay attention to those bars that say "Closed. Do not enter."?!!!

We just came home from driving doing today's final event which meant driving another almost 200 miles, back and forth to Bellingham. By the time we got home, the kids and grandkids were here. The little ones are outside in the pool. The big kids are doing the cooking. We're sitting.

People who think writers don't have to work very hard, needed to have spent some time in our moccasins for the last few weeks. It's gratifying, being out on the road. I'm glad that between us Bill and I have had the energy and mental toughness to get out there and do what needed to be done. But right now, we need to wash and iron our clothes and get ready to go on VACATION!! Really!!

On Thursday of this week, we fly to Paris by way of Vancouver, BC and London. On Sunday we'll meet up with an Arizona Alumni Tour group for a river boat trip through Burgundy and Provence. It won't be all vacation because I'm the tour's official host, but after the last three weeks, I expect it will be a walk in the park.

Queen of the Night made it as high as # 12 on the NYTimes list. Not bad for a girl who wasn't allowed in the Creative Writing program at the University of Arizona in 1964.

Not bad at all.

Locked and Loaded

Thursday, August 19, 2010

We're locked and loaded. Well, packed anyway.

By this time tomorrow we'll be in Heathrow on our way to Paris. In August. There's that old saying about "Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun." Americans go to Paris in August, when every Parisian who can manage it leaves town. And how do I know this? It turns out I've been in Paris before--also in August. Once it was during the worst heat wave in over two hundred years. We were on a tour--a Rick Steve's guided tour--and we weren't staying at four or five star hotels with state-of-the-art air-conditioning. In preparation for same, we had brought along a little battery powered fan. That one had enough juice to help us get to sleep, but it gave out overnight. On the third day of the tour, we skipped out on the walking tour experience, went to a nearby hardware store, and bought a fan. (We were going to be in France the whole time, so we only had to buy one.) I have to say that the reception clerks gave me a look when I came dragging my rolling backpack through their lobbies with a fan strapped to the back

of it, but I'll also say there were plenty of people on the bus with us who would have cheerfully slept on the floor in our various rooms.

If you want to know exactly when that tour was, I can tell you that on the night before we returned to Paris at the end of the trip, Princess Diana's limo crashed. We were back in a much cooler Paris for several days while the world became a village as the entire planet mourned the nearly simultaneous losses of Princess Di and Mother Teresa. Grief is grief in any language.

Last night some of you may have received a mysterious message from me saying I'm going to be out of the country. For the first time in my wired life, I tried to post one of those "out of office" responses that everyone else seems able to put up at the drop of a hat. I can tell you that didn't work for me. Instead, my MacBook Air went into hyper mode and started sending that message willy-nilly to any and all. Bill--good old trusty Bill--took my computer in hand and managed to turn it off. So I won't be doing THAT again.

What I will say is that while we're on vacation, Internet connections may be few and far between. Somehow I doubt our river boat will be equipped with WiFi. So this may be the last blog update for a while. And if you write to me, I may not answer for a while, either.

But I will answer. Eventually.

Lyon

Friday, August 27, 2010

Here we are in Lyon, France. It rained over night, but now it's sunny. Other people, most of our fellow cruisers, are out trudging around or being bussed around to see the sights. We are in the lounge at the back of ship. Bill is reading. I will be going back to my book soon.

We've done our share of trudging over the years--three Rick Steves backpack tours, one each in France, Italy, and England. On the Rhine/Moselle cruise years ago we did everything offered--took each excursion; listened with rapt attention to every lecture.

This time we're playing truant. It seems we had to come halfway around the world to . . . well . . . stop the world I want to get off. Because we did. We needed to. This year has been a pressure cooker--finishing books; doing book tours; overseeing a remodel. We needed to back off and give ourselves time to regroup.

I'm sure some of our shipmates see us as a bit odd--and that's probably not far from wrong. Before we boarded the ship, we bought a fan for our room, one we'll be abandoning in the room when we leave. But having air moving in our room has made it comfortable for sleeping, and comfort counts. As for the people who watched us with

raised eyebrows as we boarded our ship fan in hand? As my mother would have said and as she often DID say: Stand alone; eventually the crowd may fall.

The last ten days of August were always cause for celebration in our family--both our parents' birthdays as well as their wedding anniversary. As a consequence, they have been close to my heart these past few days, especially when we've been reminiscing with four other Bisbee "girls," all of whom are north of the big 7-0. As we've talked, we've marveled about the quality of education we received in Bisbee, Arizona, as well as the quality of our raising. All of us had involved and caring parents, launching us on our life paths. And we're all the better for it.

So thank you to the Bisbee parental units--all of them.

R.I.P.

The Traveling Rant

Friday, September 3, 2010

Bill and I once spent a weekend in a time share campground somewhere in southwestern Washington. I'd be more specific, but it was a long time ago. I was writing Hour of the Hunter at the time, so were talking more than twenty years. The cabins were fine and the company was great. What wasn't so great was the speed limit--11.5 MPH. What??? Yes, 11.5. Plain 11 was evidently too slow and plain 12 was evidently too fast. How did they arrive at the magic 11.5? Pardon me for saying this, but I bet it was a committee. And I'm willing to add that a lot of that same kind of committee-speak mindset is at work in the world of TSA guidelines.

Having just returned from France and gone through a total of three airport security screenings in one day, I have a few observations. Warning: These observations may not be politically correct. Too bad. It's a free country--at least so far.

For starters, I am a woman of a certain age. I'm of the opinion that the world is a better place when women of my age don't go around in sleeveless tank tops. Yes, there are a few women out there who have actual biceps and muscle tone, but there aren't that many of them, and I certainly don't qualify. In the summer I wear tank tops, but I top them with a shirt of some kind. Or even a light jacket. How many bombs can you hide under an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt for example, but during five out of six airport (in) security lines, I had to remove my outer garment. Okay. If everybody has to do that, fine. I'll shut up and take my shirt off. But what about the lady with the BURKA??? She went straight through--in London anyway! I'll submit that there have been a lot more bombs hidden under burkas than have been hidden under anybody's Hawaiian shirt, buttoned or otherwise.

All right, she didn't have to take off her burka off because it's against her religion. Fine! But modesty about my upper arms is part of MY religion. I'm sure if I had tried

mentioning that to one of the screeners, it would have gone over like a pregnant pole-vaulter. Is there something wrong with this picture?

In London no one had to remove their shoes. But wait, didn't the shoe bomber come from London--from Heathrow, even? In Nice we were supposed to put our shoes in the tray before running them through the machine. In Chicago they go on the conveyor belt without being in a tray. DO NOT USE THE TRAYS!!!

And then we have the husband with the two relatively new knees. I can't say enough how grateful we were for those knees. Tramping through Heathrow, up and down, in and out, would NOT have been feasible without working knees. But then you have to go through security. Okay, let me see if I can get this straight. Each passenger is allowed to carry liquids in a quart-sized Ziplock bag. One bag each. No exceptions!!!! Laptop must go in a tray by itself. Ditto Kindle and iPad. Belts, jackets, and shoes (usually) must be removed. Ditto jewelry. Then carry-on luggage goes through--flat, definitely not standing up!!! And God help you if you forget that you're carrying a tiny bottle of hand-sanitizer in your hip pocket!!

We did this trip with carry-on luggage only. (That's a hold-over from my parents' Alaskan cruise where their luggage got lost and never caught up with them until AFTER the end of the cruise. I believe that's called a cautionary tale.) So we had lots of stuff to run through. And then my husband's knees would set off the signal. Fortunately he had me to hustle around and gather up our goods because the TSA helpers were not the least bit concerned that some of our stuff might walk off in the meantime. Because they needed to thoroughly search this REALLY SCARY, DANGEROUS GUY!!!

Bill is 70 years old. He looks a lot more like Santa Claus than he does a terrorist, but because of his knees he has to be wanded, felt up and down--usually more than once--has to turn his waistband in and out (No belt, remember!) And now, in Chicago, because he tripped the alarm with his knees, his hands have to be tested for explosives.

But the guys with the fake bombs in their luggage--the ones who weren't really friends but were from the same neighborhood in Dearborn--were allowed to BOARD THE PLANE AND WERE ARRESTED IN AMSTERDAM?

Will someone give me a break here? Will someone tell me what's the matter with these people? And are they the same brainiacs who are going to be running our HEALTH CARE?????

I thought the 11.5 MPH speed limit was sort of dorky, but in the grand scheme of things it was relatively harmless. Maybe someday I'll be able to look back on all this TSA baloney and smile about it, too. Maybe twenty years from now I'll be able to think to myself, "Well, that wasn't so bad."

But not today. I'm still cranky. I'm also on some other time zone. My eyes popped open this morning at three AM and said, "Hey, there. Time to rise and shine!" And tonight, by 7:30 I'll be nodding off.

Yes, maybe when I catch up on my sleep, I won't be seeing red over the lady in the burka who walked right through the security line ahead of me. But don't hold your breath. I think I'm going to be mad about that for a long time.

Technology Runs Amuck

Friday, September 10, 2010

When I purchased my first computer in 1983, it was a dual-floppy Eagle with 128k of memory. I soon learned that the machine had a peculiar quirk. When I booted it up in the morning, it would work fine for about five minutes, then the cursor would freeze. As a result, whatever work I had done in those five minutes was irretrievably lost. I complained to the guy who sold me the computer. When I told him about the problem, he said the problem was "highly unlikely." Then one morning he happened to be there when it happened, and he allowed as how he didn't understand it at all. Then Bill came into my life. He said the same thing about the problem, "It's highly unlikely." But I'm here to tell you that almost 30 years later, with the Eagle now ensconced in the Special Collections section of the University of Arizona Library--along with a whole catalog of accompanying manuals--it still does the same thing. If you want it to work--and it still does work, by the way--you have to boot it twice.

Let's be clear. I'm a former blonde. Or maybe a recovering blonde. My basic expectation of technology is that when you turn it on or off and it works or doesn't work as the case may be. Okay, so sometimes, when something doesn't work it actually needs to be plugged in. Or the lightbulb has burned out and needs to be changed.

But long time readers of this blog already know that my relationship with computers is somewhat troubled. Like the time I answered a phone, dropped the laptop, and ended up putting my thumb through the screen in a futile effort to catch it. (Naturally this occurred on the day before I was scheduled to go on a book tour.)

This summer as we were getting ready to send out new book announcements, the IT Gal and I noticed that there was a difference between the number of addresses listed in my computer and the number of addresses listed on Bill's computer. We synched the files from my computer to his. Came out with a slightly different number in HIS computer but still not the same as the number of addresses as in MY computer. And what did Bill say to that? "It's highly unlikely." Which is to say that lots of things have changed in 25 years but some things have not.

Back to technology. E-books are on the rise. There are Kindles, there are Nooks, there are Sony Readers, and any number of others. And so this summer, HarperCollins decided to try to win me a whole new batch of readers by offering a free e-book version of Hour of the Hunter. This is my favorite book. I'm always hoping to find new readers

for that book, and the publication of the fourth book in that series, *Queen of the Night*, seemed like the perfect time to do that kind of promotion. So they did. And 50,000 people downloaded it. And then the something or other hit the fan.

There is already a version of *Hour of the Hunter* available on Kindle. I know. I bought one so I could have it available for consultation while I was writing *Queen*. But for the "free" promotion, they had to do a "new" edition. To do that they scanned the old file of the manuscript using an OCR (Optical Character Recognition) program. Since this was "a very old pre 2005 file," as my editor called it, the OCR didn't exactly recognize lots of the words. The resulting file was sort of like reading the book in not quite English. For instance, where I said "that" the free edition said "mat." Where I said "him"; the free edition said "nun." Where I said "thud," OCR said "mud." Where I said "truth," the free edition said "tram."

I can well imagine the frustration level for those readers went sky high, and they've been letting me know about it.

The situation is made even more puzzling by the fact that some e-book editions of that book--on the Sony Reader and Nook, for example, are fine. How can that be? Aren't the supposed to be THE SAME???? To quote Bill Schilb on this, "It seems highly unlikely."

The upshot is that the free version has been taken down. It will be fixed, hopefully with human oversight done by someone who knows the difference between "mud" and "thud."

If you're someone who has been the victim of a faulty version, please let me know so I can be sure once the e-book edition has been fixed that you'll be able to have a good copy. I hate to think that there are 50,000 or so people out there who think this kind of slap-dash stuff is indicative of my body of work.

And if you managed to read it in spite of the wholesale misspellings, hat's off to you. You qualify as a VERY motivated reader.

The Squeaky Wheel Gets the Grease

Wednesday, September 15, 2010

After lots of squeaking from dissatisfied e-book readers, on Monday, September 20th, HarperCollins will put up a free e-book edition of *Hour of the Hunter*. It will be available for free for one-week only. If you're a Kindle or Nook or Sony Reader customer and already downloaded the earlier free book edition, please download it again so you have one that isn't full of inadvertent typos. And if you haven't read *Hour of the Hunter*, the first Walker family book, now is your chance.

Back from Ashland

Friday, September 17, 2010

This was the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's 75th season, and it was my 25th year of being a part of the audience.

The first time I went was in 1985, and I was there with my sister and several of her friends. I saw the men and women milling happily in the lobby before the shows and during intermissions and wondered where one found menfolk who would be interested in going to all those plays. Ironically, it turned out that I had already met one. Bill and I were introduced about two weeks before I went to Ashland that first time, and we've gone to the festival together for the past 24 years.

To begin with, we would go for a weekend only, seeing as many plays as we could fit into two very busy--two-plays-a-day--days with book signings scheduled both coming and going. Then, once Bill was able to stop "working outside the home" we switched over from weekend attendance to longer stays. Now we go with two other couples. We spend a full week, seeing one play a day, playing golf on the quirky Oak Knoll Course, and having a Sunday "spa day." It's gone from being a working vacation to being a real vacation. This time, I didn't have to finish a book or do any editing while we were there. It was V-A-C-A-T-I-O-N in every sense of the word!

Our September attendance means we're usually in Ashland over September 11. We were on our way there that first 9-11 morning. I'm always glad to see the flags that the local Kiwanis Club puts up and down Main Street in remembrance of the lives lost that dreadful day.

Depending on the number of stops, it's an eight to ten hour drive between Ashland and Seattle. We have memorable landmarks along the way--the turn-around exit at Ridgefield when we realized that we had left my purse at a friend's house in Portland and had to go back to retrieve it. There's the farmhouse near the freeway in southern Oregon where we spotted three horses that had gotten loose and let themselves out onto the highway. That was long enough ago in terms of technology that we had to stop at a rest area two miles down the road and use a pay phone to report the horse issue. There's the place in Salem where a car, passing in front of us on a snowy freeway, failed to straighten out in the lane in front of us and went sailing off the road. He ended up driving off across the shoulder and an empty field before finally coming to rest with the nose of his car stuck through someone's backyard wooden fence.

As always, when we travel, I'm aware of the folks doing their version of U-Haul's "adventure of moving." I did one of those myself in 1981. In the aftermath of my divorce, it was the kids and me, driving the I-5 corridor from Phoenix to Seattle. I was behind the wheel of my 78 Cutlass Supreme Brougham which my first husband said I never should have bought and would never be able to pay for. Behind us we towed a U-Haul trailer loaded with all our worldly possessions. On the long drive north I worried every night about being able to find a parking place that I wouldn't have to back out of.

And as I drove, I was careful to cry only when both kids were sound asleep, because I didn't want them to know how scared I was in making the move from Phoenix to Seattle.

Anyone who has lived through the end of a marriage knows how that works. Things have to be pretty tough for you to finally let go of a bad marriage and strike out on your own for the great unknown. No matter how bad things may have been, what's familiar always seems safer than the unfamiliar. So I cried when the kids were asleep, and "whistled a happy tune" the rest of the time.

I had stayed in that bad marriage long enough that I had completely overspent my strength, and it took several years for me to begin to recover. It was during that recovery time that I finally gave myself permission to do what I had always wanted to do--always intended to do--which was to start writing.

I began work on my first novel in the spring of 1982. My first published book, *Until Proven Guilty*, sold in 1984 and came out in 1985. Bill's and my first date was the grand opening signing party for UPG on the 29th of June in 1985. By the end of December we were married.

In 1986 we went to Arizona for my parents' 50th wedding anniversary celebration. While we were in Phoenix, I took Bill by the insurance office where I had worked for several years before leaving for Seattle. I wanted him to meet the people who had been my colleagues back then during those very difficult years. None of the people there recognized me because they had never heard me laugh and they had never seen me smile.

My life in the Pacific Northwest has given me back those things that, at the time, I didn't even know I was missing.

So when I see those folks hauling their worldly goods in their Budget rental trucks or U-Haul trailers, with their spouses, kids, and pets caravanning along behind in another vehicle, I always wish them well. I know that they're taking a lot more than just their furniture along with them on the road. Something--some compelling need to make things better or different in their lives--has caused them to overcome the powerful pull of inertia to try living and working somewhere else. I always wish them well when I see them trundling along in the far right lane going up and down over those passes between Ashland and Eugene.

I hope all their dreams for a better life come true when they finally reach the end of the road. I hope their new jobs and new neighbors and new houses live up to their expectations. Or are even BETTER than their expectations.

Mine certainly did.

And now with vacation over, I think I hear Ali Reynolds calling to me. I'd better go to work.

A Close Encounter with Murphy's Law

Wednesday, September 22, 2010

For those of you who don't have an up-close-and-personal relationship with Murphy's Law, here it is: Anything that can go wrong will go wrong, and it will happen to me. That's what I've been dealing with this week--Murphy's Law and a series of unintended and unfortunate consequences.

When my publisher first suggested putting out a free download promotional copy of *Hour of the Hunter*, I thought it was a GREAT idea. HOTH, as we call it in my family, is a big favorite of mine, and one of my books that has consistently been under-read (if that's a real word) by my fans. The first problem with the "free" edition was that it had to be a "new" edition--one that was a remanufactured copy of an earlier edition. To do that the publisher used a program that did OCR (optical character recognition) that, as it turns out, didn't recognize a lot of my characters. The resulting edition was full of OCR-generated typos.

While I was floating down the Rhone River in blissful ignorance, frustrated readers began letting me and my agent know about the problem. And it was a BIG problem because 50,000!!!! people downloaded that error-ridden copy. (That's 35,000 more copies that were put out in the first paltry 15,000 hardback printing of that book back in 1990!)

By the time I came home from France and headed to Ashland, the situation and the complaints were coming to a head. One reviewer on Amazon allowed as how it wasn't a problem I necessarily caused, but she held all our feet, mine and the people in NY, to the fire for putting out what was ultimately a dissatisfying read. (Rightfully so, I might add.)

Some people are under the impression that writers zip off a manuscript, send it to the publisher, and then sit back and wait for the money to fall on their heads. Maybe that's true sometimes, but usually not--not out here in the real world.

In this case, we had the potential of 50,000 UNHAPPY customers out there--in the real world! And the book they were unhappy about had MY name on it!

So I talked to my editor at HarperCollins. Eventually, there was an agreement that they would correct the free download edition and make it available again. They sent me a note last week saying that it would be available this week--September 20-27--and the ITG (Translation: IT Gal) and I dutifully sent out an e-mail blast to my new book (In this case old book!) notification list. We sent it out on Friday before the starting date on Monday in hopes of giving people a heads-up. Over the weekend, several people wrote to me complaining that they tried to take advantage of the offer. I wrote back and told them they were a day early--that if they ordered on Monday morning, they'd be fine.

But remember Murphy's Law? It turned out that on Monday things weren't fine--not at ALL!!! There was no "free" copy. The download copies still cost \$8.99. And so I spent most of the day on the phone and on line with New York trying to get to the bottom of what had happened. It took until this morning before all the broken pieces finally fell into place. The download links are now working, are on the "Welcome" page of my website, in case some readers of this blog who aren't necessarily in my list tried the download adventure unsuccessfully and are willing to try again.

www.jajance.com

The free offer has now been extended to September 28, so time is off the essence. This has been a huge effort on the part of lots of people to make good on something that was and is free--something that isn't going to generate any royalties for me or sales for my publisher. I'm incredibly grateful to HarperCollins for the effort they put into turning this around and making it right. An especial by-name thank you goes to Shawn Nicholls the e-commerce guy at HarperCollins.

Because of time constraints on the above offer, I'm updating the blog on Wednesday rather than the usual Friday. In other words, on Saturday morning when you pour your coffee and think you'll be able to read a NEW blog update, it probably won't be there, so don't go sending me a griping e-mail about it. (Yes, Phil, I'm talking about you!!)

And now having spent a week working on writing for free (this blog included) it's time to go to work writing for pay. After all, if I just sit here long enough some money is bound to fall on my head. Right?

No, I don't think so.

The "Missing" Chinese Girls

Monday, September 27, 2010

People who read this blog, have probably noticed that I don't get involved in back and forth comments with people who post notes at the PI or on Facebook and Twitter, and my webpage doesn't allow for the posting of comments, either. If readers want a personal reply from me, they need to write to me through my regular e-mail address which is: jajance@jajance.com.

That being said, I'll come right out and confess that after a lifetime of being a news junky--a two-newspaper a day girl--I now read most of my news online. When the Seattle Times switched over to a morning edition, I knew that would eventually be curtains for the dead tree version of the Post-Intelligencer. That prediction was eventually borne out in real life, and that's one of the reasons I said yes to posting my blog on the dot com version of the P-I. Loyalty dies hard around here.

So I read a lot of online news articles and commentary. On my blog, I get to state my opinion. Everyone knows it's my opinion because my name is on it. For a lot of those

news sites, in order to post a comment you have to register and log on. If you're a person with a public persona, using your own name on a comment line would immediately annoy approximately half the people in the country. (I was going to use a less grandmotherly word for annoy, but that's the thing about the Internet--whatever is said here is subsequently chiseled in what amounts to be cyber-granite.) And if you can't use your real name on a comment line, why bother?

As a consequence, generally speaking, I keep my comment fingers in check. But last night I read something that left me sorely tempted to comment. After reading the juvenile name-calling spasm that followed the article, I didn't do it. Why get involved in a discussion with a bunch of m____s?. Oops. Better not say that, either.

Ultimately, I decided to do my commenting here, and here it is.

The article in question was discussing the "unintended consequences" of China's one child per family policy. Roughly paraphrasing the story, it said that in observing two different classrooms of seven year old children, boys outnumbered the girls by a ratio of more than three to one. That the girls weren't being excluded from participating in education because of discrimination, the article claimed, but because they didn't "exist." In my understanding of the Chinese culture, having sons is far preferable to having daughters. As a consequence, in order to stay in line with the one-child requirements, pregnancies that would result in female births are routinely aborted.

Wait a minute. Am I missing something here? Isn't not being allowed to be born pretty much the ULTIMATE form of discrimination?

But there's more at work here than just that. Those little girls, those missing girls, do "exist"--they just don't exist in China. They're here in the good old US of A. They're taking gymnastics classes and dancing in tutus in recitals in Silverdale, Washington. They're being raised by Jewish parents in New York City, by Lutheran parents in Minnesota, and Southern Baptist parents in South Carolina. And it's not just girls either, by the way. You can bet that the boys left to be schooled in those Chinese classrooms are the "perfect" Chinese boys. The imperfect ones--the boys with cleft palates or with other deformities, correctable or not--are living here, too. One of those "imperfect boys," after some cosmetic surgery, is being raised by loving tree-hugging parents on the Oregon Coast.

And when all those "perfect" boys grow up, and when it's time for them to find wives to help care for their aging parents what's going to happen? They'll have to come here to find "suitable" young women to marry.

Good luck with that. Remember that old song, the one that says: "How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm, after they've seen Paree?" This will be same song, second verse.

As for the kids who have come from China and been raised as Americans? Some day they may want to go back to China to visit--the same way I sometimes want to go back to South Dakota. Having spent most of my life in sunnier climes, I wouldn't want to live there. I'm just not tough enough for a South Dakota winter. And I think, in the long run, a similar situation will hold true for most of the Chinese "orphans" who came here to live. They'll probably be happy to go back home and reconnect with their roots, or at least with their country of origin, but most of them won't want to live there, either.

I've been to a McDonalds in China. Trust me. It wasn't nearly as good as the one in Silverdale. I suspect that my Silverdale granddaughters--my Chinese Silverdale granddaughters--would be in full agreement with me on that. If not, they'd let me know--and they'd let you know, too, if you had nerve enough to ask. They're outspoken, opinionated little creatures--and as American as apple pie which, it turns out, neither of them particularly likes. But what my daughter and son-in-law and the rest of our family members are giving those two girls is a love and acceptance that wasn't available to them in their birth country or in their birth families and especially not in their state-sponsored orphanages!!!

Now I believe I'll just sit back and wait for my e-mailbox to explode.

I could be wrong, but I'm guessing it's going to happen.

Following My Dream

Friday, October 1, 2010

In 1981, in the aftermath of a difficult divorce, I loaded all my worldly possessions in a U-Haul trailer, put my kids in the back seat--seat belts not required back then--and headed north on I-5, bringing with me my unreachable dream of becoming a successful writer. And it worked. The dream came true. At first I was still selling insurance during the day and writing early in the morning, before the kids got up, or on weekends when I could steal time away from soccer and T-ball games. My sister, a lifelong movie lover, took the kids with her to bargain matinees. I stayed home and wrote.

My writing career came from some pretty humble beginnings. My first two-book contract was for \$4000--a thousand each on signing and a thousand each on delivery. What did I do with that first paycheck that came--less my agent's share, of course? I went to Costco and splurged! I bought myself a bright green Nike soccer shirt! For the first time in a long time I was "rich" enough to spend money on me!

For a while I did both--writing and selling insurance. Last night, at an event, I met a woman I tried to sell health insurance to way back then. "I didn't buy it," she said, "but I remember you saying that you were writing a book. And I thought, 'sure you are.'" No wonder she didn't buy from me. She understood that I had lost interest in my career as an insurance agent. At that point, I wouldn't have bought insurance from me, either.

Eventually, in 1984, I left the insurance industry completely and went to writing full time. I met Bill and we married in December of 1985. On the first of January of 1986, he asked me what my goal was for that year. I told him I wanted to make \$25,000 from writing that year, and I did. After all, as Bloody Mary would say. "You gotta have a dream. If you don't have a dream, how you gonna have a dream come true?"

And so I've been working on writing ever since, usually seven days a week. I've taken sick leave twice, once for pneumonia and once for a hysterectomy. With my own ten fingers I've written 4.2 million PUBLISHED words. Those are words in books. That doesn't count words typed in blogs or in answering e-mails, all of which are answered by me and nobody else. Books forty-two and forty-three are both written and ready. For the ones that have already been published, I've done a minimum of thirty book signing per book and any number of other public appearances. My husband and I have hosted countless charity dinners at our various homes. In other words, yes, I'm a success now, but it didn't happen overnight. It took years of concentrated work and effort.

Now let's jump ahead to the fall of 2010. That nice old codger, Bill Gates, Sr., is on TV every ten minutes or so, singing the praises of Initiative 1098. He makes a joke out of people saying this law, if passed, will "soak the rich." But it's no joke. It will. He says it will only affect the top two percent. That everybody else will get a reduction in the state B & O and property taxes. What he isn't saying, folks, is that this is an INCOME TAX! Didn't the people of this state turn down an income tax over and over? He also isn't saying that the state portion of the "property" tax, the only part that will be reduced by this bill, will only amount to about a 4% reduction for middle income folks. The B & O tax decrease will amount to a total of \$1500 while the basic soak-the-rich income tax increase amount will be \$75,000. Big difference!

Don't worry, Mr. Gates says. It's only that top bracket that will pay, and we'll be putting that money aside for the future--for health care and education, to protect our children's future. Really. Didn't we have money in a "rainy day" fund for tough times? Wait, wait. You mean the state legislature already raided the rainy day fund and it's gone? Well, yes. And this will be, too. When it's time to make a tough budget decision, they're going to come looking for their little supply of soak-the-rich money. And when that runs out, they'll already have an income tax on the books. All they'll have to do then is increase the number of people who pay the tax by LOWERING THE BRACKETS!!! Then voila! Everybody has an income tax without anyone having to reduce sales tax, either!!!

Think about those frogs in pots of slowly heating water.

Initiative 1098 is an INCOME TAX INITIATIVE, folks. It's been built in such a way that it's an EXCISE tax and won't even be deductible off FEDERAL INCOME TAX purposes!!! And why are the two Bill Gates, both junior and senior, so in favor of it? Well, let's see. The way it's constructed, all Washington based S-class corporations, like Bartell Drugs, are included while multi-state C-class corporations like Walgreens or

Rite-aid or MICROSOFT!!! are not. No wonder the Mr. Gates are so in favor of it. And if Mr. Gates Senior and Junior are so concerned about the future of health and education in this state, they could write a check with their OWN money and give it to the state as a GIFT. Nobody's stopping them. But no, they'd rather give the state MY money.

Because of the incredible blessing of my many fans, I happen to be in that top two percent bracket. If 1098 passes, my personal tax bill in Washington will go up an additional \$125,000 per year. (If you want to do the math on that, knock yourself out!) This is an adjusted gross income tax with no deductions for charitable deductions. Oops. There goes my annual contribution to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, among others.

Years ago I saw an August Wilson play at the Seattle Rep called Two Trains Running. It was about African Americans who went North to escape the prejudice and poverty of living in the South. When things in the North didn't quite work out the way they expected or wanted, one of them told another, "There are two trains running in both directions every day. If you don't like it here, go back there." This kind of tax on high earners ONLY is one of the worst kinds of discrimination, state sponsored discrimination, and it's based on greed and envy. I'm being penalized for living the American dream.

My business is in my head and in my fingers. Unlike Bartell Drugs, I'm not a brick-and-mortar outfit.

I-5 runs in both directions.

If Mr. Gates, the WASHINGTON D.C. OFFICE of the SEIU, and the NEA (the deep-pockets funding the "Yes on 1098) succeed in putting their hands in my pocket, I may just take my business, the many jobs it creates, and my residence elsewhere.

And I won't be alone.

Ask not for whom the bell tolls. When the jobs the "rich" create migrate away from Washington State, they'll come looking for you!

The Tortilla Bomb

Thursday, October 7, 2010

This morning one of my fans wrote to ask what I'd be blogging about this week. Good question. One of my none-too-happy readers of this blog complained that one of the postings didn't seem to have a point. Welcome to the Internet. I don't HAVE to have a point, although I'm reminded of one of my favorite movies, Planes, Trains, and Automobiles, where in exasperation, Steve Martin's character tells John Candy's character, "next time have a point."

Writing a blog means I can have a point without necessarily making one.

This past week I traveled back and forth from Seattle to Tucson so I could address a writers conference, which meant speaking to a roomful of people all of whom are eager to have my job. I hope I inspired some of them to learn to live their own dreams. I have no doubt that for many of them, the front door of becoming a writer--entrance into the Iowa writer's program for example--was slammed shut in their faces.

Last year, when I agreed to do the conference, I thought I'd be in Tucson as a legitimate snowbird by last week. It turns out, I'm not, or at least I wasn't. Instead, we've stayed in Washington seeing the final stages of reclaiming two homes which would have fallen to ruin without our efforts and the application of several hundred thousand dollars in construction work which we paid into our local--Seattle area economy, creating value where there was none. Our work ethic has plugged well over \$100,000 a year into projects that have employed not one but two building contracting firms at a time when local home construction was way down. That's also discretionary income we won't have available to use if Initiative 1098 passes. Kiss those jobs and other jobs like them goodbye. Government does NOT make jobs. We do. All of us.

Wait a minute . . . I'm digressing from not having a point to making one. That's also the short answer to what kind of jobs an author without a Washington state-based publisher might possibly contribute to the local economy.

So I flew to Arizona and back on Alaska Airlines. (More jobs, by the way. Full planes are needed to make for jobs in the airline industry, including the people who BUILD airplanes.) In the process, I once again had to deal with the challenging world of GRA (Government Run Amuck) in the form of TSA. I could probably come up with a nice name for them, too, but I won't. (Grandmotherly language, please!)

For the second time since 9-11 I was busted for . . . wait for it . . . CARRYING A SONICARE TOOTHBRUSH!!!! I'm sorry. Shouldn't the people who are inspecting our luggage know the difference between a TOOTHBRUSH AND A WEAPON?????!!!! The first time it happened, was in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and the dim bulb who pawed through my toiletry kit with her bare hands, dragged my first-generation Sonicare out of the case and said, "What's this?" "It's a TOOTHBRUSH," I told her. "Haven't you ever seen one of those before?"

I can tell you that I came very close to NOT FLYING that day.

But it's ten years later now. TSA is supposed to be protecting us from armed thugs who want to kill us. Don't you think they'd have a grasp on electronic toothbrushes by now? Shouldn't they have figured that one out? And let's not even talk about the time I went through security in Tucson and didn't remember that I had left my taser in the bottom of my purse until I was on the ground in Dallas/Fort Worth. Let's see, taser/toothbrush; taser/toothbrush. Which one sounds more dangerous to you?

Okay, something else about being a snowbird. Once you've had tortillas from the Anita Street Market in Tucson's Barrio Anita, having to eat the board-like substances misnamed "tortillas" that are available in Seattle area stores is a real comedown because you do know the difference. So when I return from Tucson by air, I usually bring along four or five pounds of freshly made, thin, and exceedingly flexible tortillas, often still hot off the grill.

The first time I did that, I happened to be coming home with a piece of necessary copy-editing equipment, my ELECTRONIC PENCIL SHARPENER, not to be confused with my ELECTRONIC TOOTHBRUSH!! Having lost checked luggage more than once and being stranded, most memorably in Denver in the winter without so much as a nightgown--I try to travel with carry-on luggage only, something that has become more and more challenging in the post 9-11 era. But that's the first time I got busted for carrying flour tortillas on the plane. In the X-ray machine, the combination of pencil sharpener wiring and the solid bulk of the tortillas looked like a load of plastique with wires attached. Okay, I get it. The tortilla bomb. That was funny. Once. The TSA agents and I all laughed about it.

This time, the SECOND TIME I was busted for carrying illicit tortillas, it wasn't funny--not at all. The TSA guy grabbed my plastic-wrapped packages of still warm tortillas and tossed them into one of their plastic bins. You know, the bins people put their SHOES IN??? Does he have ANY idea WHERE SOLES OF SHOES HAVE BEEN????? Then he went through my whole bag one item at a time, including my makeup bag (all powders, no liquids) and finally, triumphantly, his hand emerged from my toiletry kit holding my TOOTHBRUSH!

To say I was fit to be tied is something of an understatement. And the TSA supervisor was lurking in the background, ready to pitch me off the flight. So I shut up. These guys may not know a TOOTHBRUSH from a STICK OF DYNAMITE but if you happen to point out the essential stupidity of the whole exercise, they have the ultimate power trip. They get to decide if you can fly!!! And, right that minute, they were already embarked on searching another terrorist threat--a woman who was probably five years older than I am, both of us SCARY SENIOR CITIZENS. Chronologically, that is. Even though I'm sure that she, like me, considers herself young at heart.

So I stifled. I went to my boarding area and tried to get over it, but then it got worse. A nice man who was probably somewhere in his fifties, came over to me and said, "I'd like to apologize for the way you and that other ELDERLY LADY were treated. There's no excuse for it."

I didn't smack him and say, WHAT DO YOU MEAN ELDERLY????!!! I said thank you. Politely. And meant it.

These last few observations are leftovers from my trip to Arizona. Arizona? You've heard of Arizona recently, I'll bet, probably because of Governor Brewer. She was the secretary of state up until the previous governor of Arizona went to Washington where

Janet Napolitano is now. . . wait for it, in CHARGE OF TSA. Sonicare toothbrushes anyone?

One thing I noticed in driving between Phoenix and Tucson is that the freeway rest areas which were shuttered under the previous administration are now open again. I'm sure they were closed as a device to get people to realize that the state was running out of money for essential services. I doubt there's a whole lot more money in the state coffers right now, but let's just say it's a bad idea to ANNOY (I would use a two-word expression that starts with a P and an O respectively, but that Grandmotherly Language Thing again) the electorate. If I'm not mistaken, Governor Brewer has a double digit lead over her opponent.

Arizona is a wonderful place. With all the unexpected rain in Arizona in October, no doubt the ocotillo are lush and green again. They probably won't still be green by the time I go back down for the tea at Tohono Chul on October 17th and for the University of Arizona Homecoming on October 23rd. The good news? I'll be going back to Tucson. The bad news? I'll have to deal with yet another encounter with TSA.

Wish me luck.

For Whom the Bella Tolls

Monday, October 11, 2010



On Saturday, after a morning shopping extravaganza (Target and Safeway) with my daughter, Jeanne T., and grandson, Colt, we encountered a little dog--make that a TINY dog--running for dear life up a busy road--116th in Bellevue. The posted limit on 116th is 35 mph, but most drivers regard that as a suggestion rather than a rule

DNA is a funny thing. By the time Jeanne T. pulled over and stopped, I had my seatbelt off and was opening the car door. Because we had

been traveling with two of the grand-dogs, whenever we stopped along the way, I had taken my loaf of freshly baked bakery bread in and out of the car with me. Angel and Kensie are good dogs, but they are not to be trusted where fresh bread is concerned. Now, though, hoping to tempt the little stray into stopping, I broke off a piece of bread

and took it with me. To no avail. I am over six feet. The dog who appears to be a miniature longhaired Dachshund is very short. But she could outrun me--could and did. Jeanne T. managed to turn her vehicle around, all the while flashing her lights and waving at people to slow down. They did.

By then the dog was on the shoulder of the road, hotfooting it north as fast as her little legs could carry her. I got back in the car. We drove a block or two before I got back out. I tried to modulate my voice, to sound friendly rather than terrifying. No dice. The dog stopped long enough to bark at me and then kept moving. About that time an SUV with two twenty-something young men in it pulled over onto the shoulder ahead of us. One of them jumped out and helped herd the dog off into the entrance of a park and away from traffic. Eventually, he was able to get close enough to her to lay hands on her collar. Once he caught hold of her, he handed the terrified, wiggling, muddy little mess over to me.

Several years ago in Tucson some workmen left a back gate open and one of our goldens, Daphne, took herself for a walk down a busy thoroughfare in rush hour traffic. An off-duty sheriff's deputy found Daph in the middle of the intersection of Alvernon and 5th. When he opened a car door, she happily climbed in--show me a golden who doesn't love going for rides!--and he took her to the Humane Society of Southern Arizona. We had come home and found her missing. We spent twenty heartbreaking minutes looking for her when I remembered her microchip. I called our home number in Seattle and there was a message reporting that she'd been found and taken to the shelter. Twenty minutes later we were there to pick her up. HAPPY ENDING!!

Once I had the dog in hand, Jeanne T. gave me one of Colt's sweaters to wrap her in, then off we went to Jeanne's vet to see if our new arrival had a puppy Lo-Jack system on-board. Turns out she didn't. She was wearing a collar but no tag. And she was petrified. She shook with a combination of cold and terror. She had almost settled down until we got to the vet's office. She did not like the vet's office. The vet looked at her teeth and said she was probably six or seven years old. Well groomed. Carpet-dog from the looks of her tiny delicate paws.

After leaving the vet's office, we spent another hour or so going through subdivisions close to where we found her asking everyone, including two mailmen (mail persons?) if they recognized her. No one did.

We came home. Brought her home. Bill took one look at her and said, "She's not going to a pound!" (This was somewhat unexpected coming from someone who had a hate-hate relationship with an earlier Dachshund in his life, one who played havoc with his ankles every he came courting the dog's owner--the woman who became Bill's first wife.) Bill also is someone who coined the term "waste of fur" (WOF) for diminutive dogs. Despite his occasional growly bear persona, however, he's also one of the world's softest touches.

On Saturday evening we were scheduled to host a family dinner. At our house "family" means a minimum of ten people. Two of them just happened to have a TINY dog of their own with some extra WOF accoutrements--a bed, a carrying-case, etc. The vet had lent us a WOF-sized leash. Colt started calling her "poor little Fella." Grandpa pointed out that Fella was a boy's name. He thought we should call her Bellevue because that's where we found her. We settled on Bella instead.

I worried about introducing a dog we didn't know to the whole tribe of large, noisy people. The grandkids are eight and under. I wondered how she'd be around little ones. It turns out she was fine. When she could get close enough, she kissed their ears. She looked surprised at the size of Kensie and Angel, but they were nice to her and the reverse was true as well. Saturday night she went home with JTJ, Colt, and the other two dogs. On Sunday Bill and I played pet detective by posting Lost Dog photos around the neighborhood where we found her. She does not like birds. (I don't blame her. Any self-respecting crow is bigger than she is.) She does not like riding in cars. She barked at me on Saturday when she was scared to death, but she hasn't barked once in the house. She isn't yappy. She has a big dog presence. She's also a red-dog--a definite mark in her favor.

Had it been my dog who was lost, I know from personal experience that I would have been out there, pounding the pavement and looking for her. So far no one has called. Yes, I write mysteries, so I'm already building up a story about this. I suspect someone was supposed to be dog-sitting her and she escaped. Or maybe a jealous boyfriend took her across town and dumped her. At any rate, no one has called about this so far.

Today is a weekday. Jeanne T. is at work. Colt is in school. Kensie and Angel are used to being able to come and go through a doggy door. Jeanne T.'s yard is dog-proof for BIG dogs but not for tiny ones, so Bella is with us. She's lying on the hassock here by my writing chair, keeping track of the crew of workmen coming and going. By the way, she does not like the sound of windows being washed.

Somewhere someone is grieving for this dog. If Bella looks like a little lost dog you happen to know, please be in touch through my e-mail address: jajance@jajance.com.

We're hoping to find her owners, but if they don't find her, she's found us.

Someone in this family will take her, but we may end up having to draw straws.

Going to the Dogs

Sunday, October 17, 2010

So, yes, I didn't write a blog update on Friday. I had already written one blog update this week, telling the story of Bella, the stray we found and captured a week ago today. But now people are saying where is the blog posting for TODAY? If I were a member of a younger generation, I might say, "bite me," but I'm not, and I won't.

Before I can tell you about what's up with Bella, I need to give you some background. Please remember I write novels. Bill likes to say that with me there are no short stories: only long stories. So be advised.

When Bill and I got married in December of 1985, one of our strategies for blending our families was adding a dog to the mix. We planned on adding one dog but, golden retriever puppies being what they are, we ended up with two sisters--Nikki and Tess, named after Nicolai Tesla. (Did I mention Bill was a practicing electronics engineer at the time?) Within days of their arrival at our house, Tess was outside playing in the snow when she cut her leg on a broken beer bottle hidden under the snow. I was living in a new house in a new neighborhood, but I had seen a vet's office coming and going, and that's where we went with our injured pet--to the Animal Clinic of Factoria. The vet came into the waiting room, saw our bleeding puppy and said, "What happened to the baby?"

That's how we met Dr. Brian Hughes, a caring vet who, from then on, was always called Dr. Eighty Bucks. It didn't matter how many dogs you took to him at a time, that's what the bill was--eighty bucks. Once that initial vet bill was paid, Nikki and Tess settled into our house and, in very short order, owned the place.

Five years later, the last thing we needed in our complicated lives life was another dog, but then one morning in the Bellevue Journal-American Bill spied a want ad containing those fateful words: Free to good home. An eleven year-old golden. We went to see her. Mandy lived less than half a mile away from where our blended family lived. The kids in her family had left home, the parents were moving into a no-dogs-allowed condo, and Mandy couldn't go with them. (Remind me not to live in one of those!) She was a sweet platinum golden, but she was also filthy. When I tried to pet her, my hand came away dirty. The owner took one look at Nikki and Tess and said she thought Mandy would be better off in a home where she could be a solo dog. Feeling like I had just dodged the extra dog bullet, I told her fine, but if nobody else takes her, call us. A week later she did.

When we went to pick Mandy up, I tried to imagine what I would say to someone giving up a dog who had been part of their family for eleven years. I needn't have worried. At the critical juncture, the telephone rang inside the house. The woman handed me Mandy's leash and took off without so much as a backward glance. Mandy came to us a collar that was so tight that had to be cut off her neck. There was filthy matted hair three inches thick on the backs of her hind legs. We had to cut that off when we gave her a bath. I'm sure flies had tormented her because she was so dirty, but I can tell you she was death on flies that got anywhere near her. She would snag them out of midair whenever they got too close. She had a limp. We had been told she had arthritis. A regimen of baby aspirin seemed to help. And did I mention she was petrified of going to the vet? Dr. Hughes would treat her in the waiting room rather than the treatment room on one of those scary metal tables. And that's how another tradition started in our family: Dog goes to Vet? Dog goes to Burger King. End of story

Mandy was with us for six months. Her over-reaction to the mere sight of a broom convinced me that someone had used a broom on her and NOT in a good way. She followed me from room to room. Wherever I took my laptop, she followed. Our yard didn't have a fence. Teaching by example, Mandy let Nikki and Tess know that they didn't HAVE to be on a leash to do what dogs need to do. In fact, Mandy wouldn't do ANYTHING if she was on a leash. As the family's chief dog-walker, her teaching that lesson to Nikki and Tess made my life infinitely easier.

Mandy never gave any indication that, fence or no, she wanted to go back to her former home. She loved being clean. She loved being brushed. She loved being loved.

One morning in September, Mandy was feeling her oats. There were some birds in our front yard and she went racing off the front porch to chase them away. She came back a three-legged dog. After another Burger King treat, Dr. Hughes sent us with her to a doggy orthopedist. There an X-ray revealed the ugly truth. It wasn't arthritis that made her limp; it was bone cancer. She was already at the vet. She was already over being scared, and that's how we lost Mandy. We gave her the best six months of retirement we could manage, but it still broke my heart to lose her. And there are tears in my eyes as I write this.

We lost Mandy in September. In November of that year, our son Bill J. came home from WSU with a five-pound pound puppy. Having just taken in Mandy, there was no way I could make the words "No New Dogs Allowed" stick. The new arrival was a scrawny little thing. Bill J. called him Bo; I called him Boney because he was. And because I didn't trust my college-aged sons to housebreak a puppy without permanently wrecking the new carpet we had recently installed in their mobile home, I offered to housebreak Boney between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Which is exactly what I did. I carried him up and down the stairs in one hand, because he was that tiny. He weighed nothing.

When Christmas was over and Bill J. and Tom took Boney back to Pullman with them, but a funny thing had happened once they got there. He wouldn't eat; he wouldn't sleep. All he did was cry because in the intervening month he had bonded with "grandma" and with Nikki and Tess. Four days after Boney went to Pullman he was back with Grandma in Bellevue. And from then on, he was my dog.

Pound puppies generally don't come with papers. Boney grew like Topsy. When I asked Dr. Eighty Bucks what kind of a dog he was, he said he thought Boney was a "black and tan canardly." I had never heard of one of those. "What kind of dog is that?" I asked, thinking it was some kind of exotic breed. "Well, you can hardly tell," Dr. Hughes told me with a smile, "but I think he's mostly an Irish Wolfhound."

He was. Part that and part German Shepherd. He had a long black hair cape on his back, a long mustache and beard, and wiry, bristly hair on his legs and shoulders. He was also tall enough to stand with his chin on the table without ever once, in eleven years, taking anything unauthorized off it. And if you read Hour of the Hunter, you'll meet Davy Ladd's dog Oho which happens to be Tohono O'odham for Bone.

Boney lived with golden retrievers, and he learned to fetch like crazy. One day, when he was about a year old, he went racing into the living room after a thrown tennis ball, crashed into a brass and glass table, and broke off one of his teeth—one of his long teeth. Dr. Hughes told us that Boney needed a root canal. Without that anchor tooth, his other teeth would slide sideways. Since Dr. Hughes didn't do doggy dentistry, he referred us to a specialist.

I may not have mentioned to you that I personally am STILL a white-knuckled dental patients some sixty years after encounters with a less than wonderful dentist in Bisbee, Arizona who didn't believe in Novocaine. This was more of the same. The doggy dentist we went to with Boney evidently underestimated how much anesthetic the dog needed and started working on him before the dog was totally under. (If you try doing a root canal on me without proper anesthetic, you can expect some trouble!) Boney had the same reaction. When we picked him up, an angry doggy dentist wagged a finger in my face and told me, "This is a VERY vicious dog. He needs to be put down immediately!"

Back we went to Dr. Eighty Bucks. Dr Hughes explained that Boney had ended up in the pound long before he should have been weaned. "He's an insecure dog, and insecure dogs are dangerous dogs. You need to take him to the Academy for Canine Behavior in Woodenville so they can teach him how to be a confident dog."

We did. We checked him in for the full six weeks of boot-camp training. He loved it. He came back to us as a perfect gentleman dog with all those very important commands well in mind: Leave it. Off. Stay. Sit. Get on your rug. Right here. Years later a visiting toddler stuck two fingers in each of Boney's nostrils. He didn't say a word. I credit the Academy of Canine Behavior.

Since then, our dogs and grand-dogs, and even some fictional grand dogs, are Academy graduates. Which brings us back to Bella at last.

When we found her a week ago today, Bella didn't have tags; she didn't have a chip. We've posted signs. We've visited area vets and groomers trying to find her owner to no avail. So now the posters are down. Bella is ours. In the intervening week we've discovered that the reason for her incredibly BAD BREATH is a mouth sadly in need of a doggy dentist. She knows no commands. She doesn't come when she's called. She doesn't sit. She doesn't stay. And she'll only do what dogs need to do if she's on a leash! Excuse me, not if she's going to be MY dog in Seattle in the WINTER!!!

As of yesterday, Bella is now enrolled as a student at the Academy for Canine Behavior for two weeks of boot camp during which she'll be brought up to date on her shots, have her much needed dental work done by ANOTHER doggy dentist specialist, and have a chip installed. (We're investing enough \$\$ in this seven year old pooch that if she gets out of yards that are designed to keep goldens in but not necessarily dogs HER size, we want to be able to get her back!)

Oh, she also needs to have a current health certificate because on November 1, two days after she gets out of the Academy, she'll be flying first class with us when we go to Tucson. We made these travel arrangements a long time BEFORE we knew we were going to have a new dog. (I can't wait to see how airport security will work with a husband with new knees, two computers, an electronic toothbrush, and a DOG all trying to get on a plane. That should be fun!)

Right this minute, I'm sure Bella thinks she's been abandoned again, and she is probably very sad. We are, too, but it's what has to happen. She's better off being in what she must regard as Doggy Jail now than she would be AFTER she bonds with us more than she already has. She went to the Academy with her own new bed and her own tiny teddy bear which is one more bed and one more toy than Mandy had when she came to live with us.

We've named our new dog Bella. Come to think of it, if we hadn't named her that, we'd have to call her Lucky--because she is.

And if you look at the dedication to my book Partner in Crime, you know that there's now one more name that should be added to the dedication page.

Thank you, Mandy. It's because of you that Bella is where she is today.

Bella will be better off when she knows SIT, STAY, and LEAVE IT.

So will we.

Officer-involved Shooting

Friday, October 22, 2010

This will probably be your basic schizophrenic blog update. Two things to discuss and no way to bring them together.

First we'll have the Bella update because those of you who have followed the last two blog updates will want to know what's happening to our little stray.

This week and next week she's hanging out at the Academy for Canine Behavior. When we found her, she was skin and bones--seven pounds when she should be nine or so. She was also a very picky eater. She'd take pieces of kibble out of her dish and leave them hither and yon. When we took her to the academy for an evaluation, Colleen McDaniel, the owner, offered her a tiny piece of kibble. Zero interest. Colleen said that dogs that aren't food motivated are sometimes tough to train.

On Monday of this week Bella went to the doggy dentist where they pulled FOURTEEN TEETH!!! Fourteen teeth that were so badly decayed that they couldn't be saved. (Twelve hundred dollars worth of doggy dentistry! Who says taking in a stray is cheap?)

All of which tells us that she'd probably had no veterinary care for a LONG time. Years. Her trainer at the academy told me that usually when dogs come back from a full day of dentistry, all they want to do is sleep. Bella wanted to EAT!! Everything. Poor puppy. Her mouth must have hurt so much that she couldn't eat properly.

Everyone, including the vet, says she's the nicest dachshund they've ever encountered. And now that she smells better and is eating better, training is going better, too. She's learned to come when she's called. So far the biggest challenge is walking on a leash. I'm looking forward to a week from tomorrow when we'll go to see what kind of miracles academy training has wrought.

I think Bella is going to be a great dog! And thank you to the people who read about Bella and are making arrangements to take their dogs to the Academy. It's a great place for dogs!

Now to the other part of this blog.

This week I'm in Tucson where there have been two officer involved shootings this week, the third in the Greater Tucson area in a month. There have been several similar incidents in the news in Seattle of late. As a result of those shootings, several people--not the officers involved--are dead. These are people who, for one reason or another, didn't put down their weapons when they were ordered to do so, or who fired on an arriving officer.

It's easy for those of us who were not directly involved to second-guess the cops involved and criticize their "excessive" use of force. I'm sorry, if I were a cop out on the street right now in the Seattle area, what happened to those four police officers in a Lakewood doughnut shop last year would never be far from the back of my mind, especially in those few seconds when it's time to decide whether or not to pull the trigger.

Many of you know that I write mysteries. Most of my books are actually considered "police procedurals." In the mid-nineties, after trusting my head and imagination for a long time, I decided it was time to do some research. Bill and I signed up for the Bellevue Citizens Academy. I thought I could show up, sit in the back row, take notes, and then go about my business.

What I didn't realize was that some of the officers teaching those classes were fans of my books. On the first night of class one of them plucked me out of the row, strapped a pistol loaded with blanks on my hip, and turned on a video of a shoot/don't shoot scenario.

First a step back in time. During a period of time in 1970 when my first husband and I spent sixty days being stalked by a serial killer, I wore a loaded weapon every day. We lived far from town, far from any other neighbors, and miles from the nearest telephone. I was alone at our house for about forty of those sixty days, and I was determined to

protect myself. I actually fired my weapon once . . . well, make that nine times. It was a .22 revolver and one morning I fired all nine shots out the window of my vehicle at a rapidly retreating rattlesnake. By the way, the snake was still laughing when he went up and over our rock wall and disappeared. Snakes, however, are notoriously hard to hit. I figured if the killer showed up, he would have presented a larger target.

It took me years to realize that by simply strapping on that gun I had already made a critical decision--I had made up my mind that if it came down to a place where it was either him or me, it was definitely going to be HIM!! It turns out that's a decision countless police officers make each and every day when they put on their uniforms and weapons and go to work. Last year forty-eight law enforcement officers died in this country doing just that--their job. That's forty-eight men and women who kissed their families goodbye, went off to work, and never came back.

So back to the citizen's academy. The instructors took me up to the front of the class and turned on a video, explaining that at some point in the video I would need to make the decision to pull the trigger. The camera operated at the eye level of an officer arriving at a mini-mart. The clerk indicated that the bad guy was in a back room. The camera-arriving-officer goes to the door of the back room. Inside is a man standing on the far side of a store room. When the door opens, he grabs something--piece of iron, it turns out--and charged toward me with the club raised over his head. I fired my weapon. In the aftermath, it's clear that in that particular circumstance, firing was the right thing to do--the only thing to do.

That experience brought home to me that in those kinds of situations--in real life situations--there are only split seconds for officers to make those life and death decisions--to make the call that it's either him or me, and it had better be him.

So, yes, I understand the grief the families of those suspects feel when one of those situations has spiraled out of control and a loved one dies. Losing someone in that fashion causes a strange kind of amnesia. The mind tends to write over years of bad stuff. What remains are all those other memories, the good ones: the cute little kid who loved riding his Big Wheel; who sat on Santa's lap and screamed for his first Christmas picture because he was scared to death; who proudly stuck his first lost tooth under his pillow in hopes the Tooth Fairy wouldn't forget. The problem is, that cute little kid grew up and took paths that turned him into a dangerous adult--one who threatened himself and others, including the cop who gunned him down. Yes, the adult is dead, but the families are left mourning not only the man who is dead, but also their hopes and dreams of what he might have been; could have been; should have been.

But believe me, the dead person's family aren't the only folks left grieving in a situation like that. It's also a life-changing experience for the police officers involved. Most of the people who go into law enforcement do so because they're idealists and because they sincerely hope to make the world a better place. They don't hop out of bed each morning and go to work thinking, "Hey, I wonder if I'll get to shoot someone today." When the unthinkable happens, when they do have to pull the trigger, they live with the

consequences of that action--official consequences and unofficial consequences--for the rest of their lives. And if they don't make that decision in time, their families may have to live for the rest of their lives with the losses resulting from that momentary bit of indecision.

So the next time we hear about an officer involved shooting, before you or I jump in and say what should and shouldn't have happened, let's all take a step back. We weren't there. Our lives weren't on the line.

If you're so inclined, say a prayer for all involved--the suspect and the suspect's families and the police officers and their families. If you're not a prayerful sort, just keep those folks in your thoughts for a while. Try walking a mile in their shoes. And remember, everyone who was out there was doing the very best they could under impossibly stressful circumstances.

Thus endeth the sermon of the day.

Vaya Con Dios

Thursday, October 28, 2010

We've been in New York City on business this week. Over lunch, someone complimented me on a necklace I was wearing, a three inch silver rose on a set of black leather strings. I said thank you, but there was so much more I wanted to say. And since I have a blog, I get to say it.

In the early part of the last century, a young woman was born in Florida. A few years later, due to her father's health, Cele Peterson's family pulled up stakes and moved to Bisbee, Arizona, where her parents started a clothing business. In the late twenties the store was sold to a family named Courteol. By the time I was growing up, Irma Courteol's was synonymous with high fashion in Bisbee. Cele's family moved on to Tucson where in the early thirties, she decided to establish her own clothing store. A family friend bet five hundred bucks that she wouldn't last six months. People in Tucson know that her store was still going strong some seventy years later when she passed away earlier this year at 101. And right up until her death, despite severe macular degeneration, she was at her store every single day, welcoming customers, old and new alike, and serving as hostess-in-chief.

When I met Cele and told her about our Bisbee connection, she regaled me with stories from back then, tales that bore very little resemblance to the version of Bisbee history that was told to us in school. For instance, no one ever mentioned that the guy who drowned in the flash flood down Brewery Gulch was actually washed out of a house of ill-repute up the gulch. No one so much as mentioned such a thing in Bisbee in the fifties, but if you go down the gulch these days and see the abandoned steps that led to those old "cribs," you can pretty well figure it out for yourself.

But back to Cele. Since she wanted to establish a line of high fashion in Tucson where she designed many of her own items, she also made treks to New York City on buying trips. Because there were hispanic folks in her entourage, they had to camp out along the way, coming and going, because some members of her group weren't allowed to stay in hotels. Yes, our country really has come a long way since then!

I lived in and around Tucson for years without daring to set foot inside Cele Peterson's. As a consequence, I had no idea about the Bisbee connection! A few years ago, when I was in need of a new dress for a special occasion, I ventured inside--much to my husband's sincere regret. With the help of a bevy of attentive clerks, including Cele's daughter, I was in back trying on clothes while Bill sat next to Cele's dainty little desk by the front door where she made it her business to charm both wallet and credit cards out of his pocket. Naturally I came away with the new dress I needed (make that wanted) and with that very distinctive rose necklace.

I also came away with a sincere respect for a daunting lady who went after her dreams no matter who told her they wouldn't work. For years she hosted a weekly radio show in Tucson that was all about just that--following your dreams. I was honored to be one of her guests.

This tribute to Cele Peterson is months late in coming, but with Cele that wouldn't matter. The clothing she both designed and sold had a kind of timeless beauty about it; so did she.

Vaya Con Dios, Cele. You were and are an inspiration.

Sit, Stay, Fly

Wednesday, November 3, 2010

In the last three weeks, I've flown several times, and blogged about it as well. In the past, some of my TSA interactions have been less than wonderful, so I need to say once and for the record, that five out of six of my last TSA experiences were good, including the people who helped me box up a reluctant purse dog for the flight to Tucson yesterday. So thank you.

And now to Bella, the abandoned long-haired red-dog miniature Dachshund we rescued from certain death three weeks and a little bit ago. At the moment, she is sound asleep in a patch of sunlight on our patio in Tucson. Daphne, her red-dog Golden big sister, a confirmed desert dog at this point, is sacked out in the SHADE.

Between when we found her and now, Bella has spent two weeks in remedial obedience training at the Academy for Canine Behavior in Woodinville; she's had a complete health work up, including all shots and a microchip; her long-neglected teeth--fourteen of which had to be removed--have been fixed--and her bad breath has improved immeasurably.

So here we are working our way through learning about a dog we: a: Didn't expect to have and b: Didn't necessarily want. We don't regard ourselves as "small dog" people and this is not a small dog. This is a TINY dog. Next to her, Daphne looks like a gorilla! Bella has evidently been an "only" dog in her past life. It may be due to her former tooth problems, but she was accustomed to sampling her food dish and then walking away. Daph is your basic CLEAN YOUR PLATE kind of dog. Actually, your plate and anybody else's. So Bella will have some adjustments to make there.

We brought her back from the Academy about 2 PM on Saturday. At four we were due at a family gathering in downtown Seattle. This was a relatively new dog, and we were about to leave her in our house unsupervised, so we put her in a gently used canvas dog crate someone had thoughtfully given us. When we came home, she greeted us at the back door. You can file this under "no good deed goes unpunished, because she had used her totally recovered mouth to chew a Dachshund sized hole through the side of the crate. And then, just for good measure, she left a doggy deposit in our closet as an expression of her general disapproval. Fortunately we have an excellent carpet cleaner and an excellent carpet cleaner operator! Also fortunately, at the family get-together that night, I received two NEW canvas dog crates as birthday presents. At the time I opened them, I thought I didn't need them which only goes to show how much I know at any given time.

Our travel plans for this fall and winter had been set up long before Bella arrived on the scene. Three weeks and two days after being abandoned on a busy street in Bellevue in the cold and rain, Bella flew first class from Seattle to Tucson. She wasn't happy about being in her new purse-sized crate, but she managed. And so did we. While Bill was having his bionic knees checked by TSA, someone else helped me corral Bella and the rest of our goods as well.

I suspect that in her past life Bella was an apartment dog or maybe a condo dog. The idea of having an enclosed backyard to explore at her leisure seems to surprise her. She follows us in and out of the house. I think she's afraid we're going to leave her someplace, too. We're not. But we do have to keep a close eye out. We've seen the occasional eagle in this neighborhood, but considering the tongue-lashing she gave the German shepherds next door yesterday afternoon, it's clear that she wouldn't go quietly.

When Bella came to live with us, I'm sure she thought we were amazingly dumb because we didn't know her name. And the commands we tried to give her were mostly a foreign language.

Now, thanks to two weeks at the Academy, we're all on the same page and on the same sunny patio.

PS Thank you, Sheri Coleman, for generously giving me a title for this morning's blog update.

Veteran's Day

Wednesday, November 10, 2010

I've never served in the military, but by being able to write this blog, I reap the benefits of those who have.

My two brothers were in the Army, one a career guy who started out in ROTC at the University of Arizona. My one son-in-law spent twenty years in the US. Navy. The other one did two tours of duty with the Marines in Desert Storm and was active duty Coast Guard when he was diagnosed with melanoma. One of my nephews is a member of the US Marine Corps. My best friend's two sons are currently serving in the Navy, one on board a nuclear submarine and the other as a Navy SEAL.

Over the years I've met plenty of fans who were also members of the military. Some have set me straight when I've wandered off course. For example, I know from several different sources now that there's no such thing as an "ex Marine." Once a Marine always a Marine!

I've heard from service men and women who read my books for R & R while serving overseas. One of them, Cesar Flores, first read one of my books while he was in the hospital recovering from burns he received when an IED blew up the Humvee he was driving in Iraq. We corresponded for a number of months before he reenlisted, prior to coming home. Several years ago when I had my bout with uterine cancer, he kindly sent me his St. Michael's Medal (St. Michael is the patron saint of paratroopers) to help see me through my surgery and recovery. I'm fine now, and Cesar is still on active duty.

I've been honored to know vets and count among my friends people like Laroque Dubose, Phil Fisher, Hal Witter, and C.W. McAdams to say nothing of the entire Stockdale clan. I've enjoyed being around these folks and I've grieved the loss of others. Doug Davis was an outstanding young man from Bisbee Arizona--valedictorian of his class and a West Point graduate--who lost his life in Viet Nam. I never think about Doug without wondering what he might have accomplished had he lived out his life rather than having his name carved on that cold granite wall in Washington.

Every single one of us owes an astonishing debt to each of these folks, a debt that can only be repaid by keeping this country truly "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

And so today on Veteran's Day I'd like to say thank you to all of them--and to their loved ones as well--to their parents and children; husbands and wives. Thank you for doing the hard work that keeps the rest of us free.

Contrast is Everything

Monday, November 15, 2010

Yesterday, Sunday November 14, was a study in contrasts.

We started the morning by watching the last Formula 1 race for the year from Abu Dhabi. No one could be more surprised than I am to find that I'm a fan of Formula 1 racing. Ten years ago, when I took Bill to the race in Monaco, it was more of a gesture on my part than it was real interest. But over the years, that has changed. Now I'm familiar with the various drivers involved and even have favorites. A few years after our trip to Monaco, we managed to attend the last Indianapolis Formula 1 race here in the US. Due to a spectacular wreck in Montreal the week before, a young racer named Sebastian Vettel drove that day.

On our way back to the hotel that night we were on the bus with some of the mechanics who worked for Red Bull. They had come in pretty much dead last again, and the guys were saying that if they ever had decent cars with decent engines they'd be competitive. Boy were they right!! This year, Red Bull Racing walked off with both the constructor's championship and the driver's championship. It turns out that Sebastian Vettel at age 23, is the youngest drivers champion ever. (Unlike the other Formula 1 fans in the household, I was actually rooting for him to win.)

Once the race was over, it was time to put on my "author under glass" duds and go to Tubac, Arizona, to speak at a fundraising event to benefit Tohono O'odham Community College.

In September of 1968, my first husband had a contract to teach English and Spanish at the high school in Sells. That year I had a contract to teach English at Pueblo High School in Tucson. Over the summer, I had taken six units of Library Science at the University of Arizona. The first night of in-service meetings, my husband came home with the news that the librarian at Sells had just taken a hike. Did I want the job? And so, with that bare minimum of formal library science schooling (Cataloging and Selection of Materials), I was given a temporary librarian credential and was hired to be the school librarian at Indian Oasis Schools. (In the course of the next three years I finished my M Ed with a major in Library Science. Believe me, it was easy to ace those classes. Every time I started a new semester, I knew EXACTLY what I needed to learn from that class!)

So that's how I ended up serving as a librarian at Sells. I split my time between two different schools--the one in Sells and the one at Topawa. When Baboquivari High School broke away from Indian Oasis School, I stayed on with the elementary school level kids. I told 26 stories a week in K-6 classrooms. With the help of two different aides, Pauline Hendricks and Melissa Juan, I checked hundreds of books in and out each week.

A few weeks ago, I heard from a man who remembered me from those days. Not only did he recall some of the stories I told, he said that coming to the library and encountering the Beverly Cleary books had turned him into a lifetime reader.

Some of the stories I told were from picture books and fairy tales that came from my own Anglo background, but the stories the kids loved the most were the ones that were traditional Tohono O'odham winter-telling tales which I came to love, too.

I worked on the reservation for five years. During that time, I learned about a culture that had existed in southern Arizona for eons without my having any knowledge or appreciation of it. The people I met were kind and loving and generous. As we were leaving the reservation in 1973, Pauline, one of the aides, gave me a basket shaped like an owl. She told me at the time, "Judy, if you can't make it with your own tribe, you can always come back here."

Years after leaving the reservation, I finally got around to writing about it. In my Walker Family books, I used many of the people I met on the reservation and many of the stories I heard to create the background for those characters.

Yesterday it was time to see if what Pauline said was true. I took the Owl Basket with me and went back to give back. When I was on the reservation it was still called Papago, and there was no community college. Yesterday's event was held in Tubac at Tohono O'odham Village, a gift shop operated by the tribe. It was a big crowd with lots of Anglos in attendance, but there were plenty of the Desert People there as well. Some of them had been students when I was there. Some were the children of students.

After my presentation, a group of six Tohono O'odham young people came forward, stood in a circle, and offered a traditional blessing for the people in the audience. They sang songs in the Tohono O'odham language accompanied by nothing other than gourd rattles.

As I sat there listening, I felt the power of that blessing, but I couldn't help but be a little amazed that I was privileged to live in a world and on a day where Formula 1 was part of my morning and fry bread and traditional Native American songs were part of my afternoon.

Yes, contrast is everything.

Sunday Morning

Sunday, November 21, 2010

What's playing on the stereo system here in Tucson this morning is a song called Solamente Una Vez. Twenty five years ago in September, while Bill and I were dating, we went to a charity luncheon for the old Bathhouse Theater. As part of the entertainment a young Bathhouse actor, Peter Acosta, sang that song to us in Spanish

and translated it as well. (You'd probably recognize the tune because it was sold in the U.S. under something akin to The Million Guitars with completely different English lyrics)

We were told that, loosely translated into English, the words said "only once in a lifetime does the light of love fall across your garden path." I don't know how accurate that translation is. I only know the effect it had on both Bill and me at the time. My first husband had died close to three years earlier. Bill's first wife had died after a long struggle with cancer almost a year earlier. It was at that luncheon in September, hearing those words, that we looked at one another and realized that what we thought was a simple friendship had morphed into something else. When we met at a widowed retreat months earlier, it wasn't exactly love at first sight. It was more understanding at first sight. We had both been through similar periods of loss and despair with our first spouses. We were both trying to figure out how to make sense of all those shattered dreams and broken hearts. At that luncheon, listening to those words, we looked at one another and realized, "Oh! What took us so long to figure it out? This is that once in a lifetime. Let's not blow it." Less than a month later, we were engaged. We got married four days before Christmas. And Peter Acosta did a return engagement and sang *Solamente Una Vez* at our wedding.

So tomorrow we fly back to Seattle with our purse dog, Bella, to spend the holidays with our kids and grandkids. All season long, we'll be remembering those wonderful days of being in love and knowing that, for us, the long tough emotional winter was, despite the time of year, bursting into spring. We can laugh at memories of our first Thanksgiving together. A huge snowstorm in the Seattle area left the Denny Regrade so deserted that Bill and I, acting like a couple of carefree kids, had a huge snowball fight right in the middle of Second Avenue. We did all our Christmas shopping at an almost deserted Bon, and had our gifts wrapped and sent home by UPS days later.

It'll be the twenty-fifth anniversary of "his" kids meeting "my" kids. That was fun. We were in love. The kids were NOT in love. It'll be the 25th anniversary of putting up one of the world's ugliest Christmas trees which we bought together and then tried to decorate with "his" decorations and "my" decorations. Whoever said blending families was easy?

It'll be the twenty-fifth anniversary of our first Christmas dinner as a "family," complicated immeasurably by my having spent Christmas Eve in the hospital with a severe case of food poisoning picked up on our way home from our honeymoon.

Yes, that song playing on the stereo system this morning brought it all back--that whole season of joy that started twenty-five years ago. It made me smile, but it also made me glad. Twenty-five years of fun and complicated and annoying and delicious holidays spent together. What could be better than that?

Fifty years maybe?.

I'm Not A Snowplow Virgin Anymore

Saturday, November 27, 2010

It's Black Friday. I am NOT shopping. I am sitting at home, in front of the fireplace, with a dog in her bed on what I call a hassock, what my daughter calls an ottoman, and what my mother would have called a foot stool. Whatever. You know what I mean. We're happy. We're warm. It's raining outside. I should have said, IT'S RAINING OUTSIDE!!! This is very good news. The snow has melted. All of it.

And speaking of snow, we are no longer snowplow virgins. The snowplow that came as a birthday present over a year ago and then proved to be unnecessary LAST winter, has already proved its worth THIS winter. The snowplow worked. We plowed and sanded the driveway last Tuesday and we plowed and re-sanded it again yesterday so everyone could make it up the hill for Thanksgiving dinner.

About that sand. We happen to have a large stack of sandbags sitting in a garage. They contain sand that was purchased for part of the remodel we did a year ago, and the bags in the stack turned out to be EXTRA sand. So the sand was already bought and paid for and, better still, already here. It was just a matter of spreading same.

So picture this. Our little Kubota has a snow plow on the front and a minimal truck bed in the back. So we loaded the bags of sand into the back. By the way the bags are 100 pounds apiece. Bill is 70+. I am 66+. The bags were heavy, but we managed. We made it work. Then, we took a box knife. Bill drove the Kubota up the driveway. I walked behind. (No he does not think he's a king. He's just a much better four-wheel drive driver.) I would cut the paper sand bags with the box knife and then sweep the sand out the crack between the floor of the truck bed and the tail gate. It worked. Worked like a charm.

We did it on Tuesday so we could go shopping. We went to our daughter's neighborhood supermarket where my grandson is a noted personage. We call it Colty's Red Apple as opposed to anybody else's Red Apple. This is a small grocery store. It was Tuesday before Thanksgiving and the day AFTER a serious weather event in the Seattle area. But capitalism works. In the meat department, I was able to choose among five twenty pound turkeys. (The one I chose was delicious, by the way.) But we were able to buy everything we needed with the exception of one thing--a can of peach pie filling needed for our traditional holiday fruit salad. For some reason, they had plenty of pumpkin pie filling but no peach. (By the way, I'm philosophically opposed to canned pumpkin pie filling. Pumpkin pie in this house is only made from REAL pumpkins, and on Wednesday we made three of them!) So let's hear it for the grocery store that made the feast possible.

Three Christmases ago, we had the wind storm, the Hanukkah Windstorm, I believe it was called. The five to nine day power outage that followed resulted in our having a natural gas generator installed at our house the next year, and one at our one daughter's house the year after that. Our second daughter lives on the Kitsap. Her

generator was supposed to be installed last Tuesday. Unfortunately the lights went out on Monday night. The installation didn't happen on Tuesday. Late Tuesday afternoon, our daughter bailed. She and the granddaughters came to Grandma's where it was warm. We had heat. We had hot water. We had food. And they stayed through last evening, after Thanksgiving dinner. That meant the girls were here to help bake pies, peel potatoes, dish up pickles, and set the table. Our son-in-law stayed put at home in hopes that a: the lights would come back on and b: the generator installers would show up. I shook my head and thought, "What's he smoking? The day before Thanksgiving? It's never going to happen!" Well, how wrong could I be? The lights came on at 5:30 AM on Wednesday morning, which meant someone was out in the dead of night, working hard to restore power. And the generator installers showed up that day, too. Capitalism again!!! And our son-in-law was right. He was also there to supervise the installation. The next windstorm, all God's children will have generators!!

Dinner was great. Care packages of leftovers went home for our son-in-law. Tomorrow is Grandma's Day with the grands in downtown Seattle. It'll be fun. It'll be cold but it won't be snowing.

What could be better than that?

For the Holiday's..

Thursday, December 2, 2010



Christmas.

Daughters are pretty wonderful to have around. So are daughters-in-law. The daughter reminded me that autographed books make GREAT Christmas presents. And my IT savvy daughter-in-law is the one who manages my website. And sends out announcements like this one, for example.

When I used to have November or December books, signing books for the holidays wasn't a problem. And, in actual fact, **Ali # 5, Trial by Fire**, will be going on sale in paperback on December 28th, but that's a little too late for

So here's an idea. On Friday, December 10, I'll be signing at Seattle Mystery Bookshop from 12 PM to 1 PM. People who want signed books, including the book of poetry, should place their orders before then either by phone or by e-mail to staff@seattlemystery.com. I'll be glad to personalize books however you want them personalized. Yes, I sign hardbacks. Yes, I sign paperbacks. Yes, I sign new books. And, yes, I sign backlist copies. Last summer, a fan named Robin, had one of EVERYTHING signed, because she understands that my corporate policy is to leave NO book unsigned!!

All that being said, have a great holiday season. And I'll be back on the signing trail on February 1 with Ali # 6, Fatal Error.

I just put it down for a moment.

Thursday, December 9, 2010

Twenty five years ago, on the occasion of Bill's and my engagement party, we went to the Merchant's Cafe in Pioneer Square for a performance of The Texas Chainsaw Manicurist. Some of the memorable tunes from the show were "All I Wanted in Life Was a Spyrograph," "My Barbie Was the Slut of the Neighborhood," "We're All Watching Dynasty," "Up, Up, Up With the People of the World," "Parakeet Counselor by Day; Nightingale by Night," and "We'll Live Forever in Reruns." In other words lots of good songs with great lyrics written by a couple of talented guys from Newport High School in Bellevue.

One of the songs--the title of which escapes me now--was a plaintive duet sung by two guys who had both lost something. One had lost the love of his life and the other had lost his Snickers bar. "I just put it down for a moment. . ." one says and it's really not clear if we're talking about the girl, the candy, or both. But I was humming that line to myself earlier today.

You see, I had been happily working along on my laptop. I closed it and put it down--as in "I just put it down for a moment. . ." Really! Minutes later, when I picked it up again in preparation for writing my Friday blog update, my e-mail program had gone AWOL. It was no longer present anywhere on my computer!!! Bill managed to find it--I think he said it was somewhere in the Mobile Me Cloud--and reinstalled it, but I had to put in all my preferences--my fonts, my toolbars, etc.,--and now I'm trying to remember what it was I intended to say.

December around our house is always challenging, and we knew going in this one would be a doozy. For years I had told Bill that he needed to plan a big party for our 25th anniversary. He had cheerfully embarked on doing so when the University of Arizona threw an unexpected wrench into the works by announcing that, at winter graduation in Tucson, I would be given the 2010 Alumna of the Year award. So now, instead of spending all of December here with the kids and grandkids for the holidays, we'll be packing up our Sunday-Go-To-Meeting duds and our Purse Dog, Bella, and heading for Tucson for several days next week. (Bella's new Roll-Aboard dog carrier arrived today--just in time.)

And the plan for our wedding anniversary party also went out the window. But hey, no problem. I remember the December of the great Hanukkah storm. That year we celebrated our wedding anniversary with a romantic candlelit dinner of Honey Nut Cheerios and champagne. So we're going to celebrate--it just won't be the celebration we expected to have.

I often find reason to be thankful that, twenty-five years ago, I had brains enough to marry an engineer--a double E, an Electronics Engineer. And this week, if you're reading and enjoying these words, then you should be glad I did, too. Without Bill, this blog update really wouldn't exist.

Alumna of the Year

Wednesday, December 15, 2010

In 1962 I won a scholarship that allowed me to be the first member of my family to enroll in a university. The scholarship was just a drop in the financial bucket necessary for me to go on to school, however, and with four younger children still at home, attending the University of Arizona still seemed like a distant dream.

Then Rachel Riggins came to my rescue. Left as a young widow with a child, she took up teaching at Bisbee High School where she taught English and Journalism and was the faculty adviser for the school paper, the Copper Chronicle. She was my home room teacher all four years. During our senior year, my best friend, Pat McAdams Hall, and I served as co-editors of the paper. During that time we came to know Mrs. Riggins fairly well. When she heard about my financial difficulties with attending school, she suggested Pima Hall.

Pima, it turned out, was a co-op dorm for "poor but smart" Arizona girls. The 39 or so girls in the dorm were expected to do their own cleaning and cooking. Everyone had to do one "duty" a day. Those varied from preparing meals, setting tables, doing dishes, cleaning bathrooms, sweeping floors and dusting. The duties were organized and assigned by a house manager and generally took an hour or so a day. Pima had the lowest rent of any of the residence halls on campus, and we paid a dollar a day to have three meals a day six days a week. On Sundays we had breakfast and lunch and then raided the fridge for dinner. Meal planning was done by the girl who served as business manager. She collected board monies, created menus, and ordered the groceries necessary to cook them.

In addition to doing our dorm duties, Pima Hall girls served as ushers at various U of A venues, handing out programs and helping seat people in the main auditorium, now Centennial Hall, as well as at drama department productions and the foreign film festival. Once the program was over, it was our job to go back to the venue and put up the seats. That was good for three dollars a night per girl. In addition, most of the girls had other jobs on campus. I worked fifteen hours a week doing filing and mimeographing in the English Department. (If you don't know what mimeographing is, purple ink and all, you're MUCH too young!)

Pima was started during the Great Depression by a young Dean of Women named Evelyn Kirmse. She saw that girls were having to give up on their educational ambitions when their families ran short of money. It was started as an experiment with plenty of people in the administration expecting it to fail. It didn't. I'm happy to say that Evelyn

Kirmse was still teaching English at the U of A when I was there in the early Sixties, and she came to our Founders Day Dinner every year.

Pima lasted from the Thirties to the Eighties at which time it was discontinued. The building at 1027 E. Second Street is now the Honors Building. That's of a piece, really. Pima may have been the smallest dorm on campus, but it was also tops when it came to academics. Each year we walked away with the highest GPA of any of the residence halls.

I came to the university from Bisbee. At the time Bisbee had a population of around 16,000. I walked into a situation where the freshman class was approximately 5,000 strong. Pima Hall, full of ambitious small town girls, was a good starting place for making my way into a much larger world than I had encountered before.

No one at Pima was part of a sorority. We were all self-professed GDI's, and relished our position as independents. It was pretty amazing when, in 1965, a girl from Pima Hall, Emily Sult from Florence, walked away with the Homecoming Queen crown.

I lived at Pima for all four of my undergraduate years. I came to the University wanting to become a writer. I majored in English. The quality of education I had received in Bisbee from people like Mrs. Riggins, Anne Medigovich, Richard Guerra, Miss Shreve, and Mr. Biba made it possible for me to go to the university and end up in Honors English classes. Both my junior and senior year at college, I was in an honors English lit class with a full-fledged professor and only six students. As a junior, I was disappointed when the professor barred me from signing up for his Creative Writing program because I was a girl. You'll notice that being barred from his class didn't keep me from becoming a writer, and that experience gave me the impetus to write about one of my scariest fictional characters, Andrew Philip Carlisle who, surprisingly enough, turns out to be not only a serial killer but also a former professor of Creative Writing. (There's more than one way to get revenge.) Since the real life Creative Writing professor was dead by the time my first book was published, he may or may not know how all this turned out, but I know that I'm hoping he does!

Time has passed, more time than I like to consider. I'm on a plane this morning, with Bill and Bella, our rescued dachshund, on our way to Tucson. Yes, I know heading for Tucson in the middle of December is not a typical snow-bird pattern, especially since we plan to be back home in Seattle for Christmas, but this isn't a typical time. On Saturday, December 18, I'll be honored at Winter Graduation as the University of Arizona's Alumna of the Year. (Think of it as a late-bloomer's version of being elected Homecoming Queen!)

After the ceremony a number of Pima Hall girls will be coming to our house in Tucson to celebrate.

While I was living in Pima Hall, I served as song leader. Our housemother, Mrs. Van, took exception to several of them, including and most especially,

Roll me over in the clover,
Roll me over, lay me down
And do it again.

Come to think of it, now that my oldest granddaughter is about to become a freshman at Washington State, maybe Mrs. Van had a point.

At the party, I have no doubt there will be a rousing rendition of Pima Hall's theme song.

Pima Hall, our castle tall,
Where fairest dreams come true.
We pledge our hearts in loyalty
Because we're proud of you.
Our hearts fill with gladness,
Never crowded with sadness
For the sun always shines
Through the darkest of days.
Pima Hall with stately walls
A palace yes indeed.
Where memories like jewels we share
With true sincerity.
So laugh, cry, and love,
They are all just a part of
Our Pima Hall.

Writing those words here, on my way to be honored at graduation, it seems to me that the song eerily foretold my future because, for me, all my fairest dreams really did come true.

Between them, the University of Arizona and Pima Hall made that possible.

Alumna of the Year, the Rest of the Story

Monday, December 20, 2010

I'll admit right now that for years I walked around bearing a grudge against the University of Arizona, my alma mater, because I wasn't allowed into the Creative Writing program as an undergraduate back in 1964. That situation didn't improve when, sometime in the eighties, my inquiry about possibly teaching a course in Creative Writing at the University of Arizona was met with derision by the then current program director. He told me in no uncertain terms, "Oh, we don't do ANYTHING with genre fiction here. We only do LITERARY fiction!" Which, once again, pretty much left me on the outside looking in.

After that, for a time, the grudge got even worse. That's when I wrote *Hour of the Hunter*. But over time, I wondered what I would do if the U of A ever noticed that I was not only writing books but having them published as well. Then somewhere in the early nineties, I got an answer to that question. Someone from the University of Arizona's Friends of the Library called and asked if I would speak at their annual spring luncheon. One thing I learned while teaching on the Tohono O'odham Reservation is this: Yes is better than no. Always. So I asked when and then next thing I knew I was speaking at the luncheon in Tucson.

While at the luncheon I learned that two people in the group who were inveterate mystery readers, former University of Arizona President, John Schaefer, and the Dean of the Libraries, Carla Stoffle, had decided it was time to create a special collection at the University of Arizona Library called Women of Mystery which focuses on female American writers of contemporary mystery fiction. Think of this as genre fiction getting the green light and an official stamp of approval at the U of A.

Some of you know that my pen name, J. A. Jance as opposed to my given name of Judith Ann, came out of my publisher's misgivings about male readers accepting police procedurals written by a woman named Judy. That was in the early eighties, but between now and then, some things haven't changed. To this day, female mystery writers receive far less critical attention than male mystery writers do and almost zero scholarly attention. When I heard about the Women of Mystery Collection, I saw this as a very BIG DEAL and promptly offered to donate my papers to the special collection. (By the way, for you geeky guys out there, the term "papers" includes my original computer. Yes, my dual floppy Eagle, an early PC clone with 128 K of memory, resides there to this day along with all the manuals needed to run it.)

Within minutes, so to speak, after donating my papers, I found myself serving on the board of directors of the Friends of the Library. It was as though they had put out the welcome mat at the University of Arizona and brought this long strayed Wildcat back home.

A few years later, in 2000, someone from the Friends engineered my being offered an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. For someone barred from the Creative Writing program, that was especially sweet to say nothing of ironic. My eighty-something parents, my father with one year of normal school and my mother with a seventh grade education, were both in the audience as the flour tortillas soared through Bear Down Gym like so many crazed flying saucers. At the time I didn't think it could get any better than that, but it just did. In a lot of ways, being Alumna of the Year for 2010 was even better. Think of it as being elected Homecoming Queen some forty years late.

Bill and I arrived in Tucson on Wednesday afternoon in advance the weekend's festivities. On Thursday we went to a dinner hosted by the Friends, many of whom I've come to know over the intervening years. John Schaefer's photo of the Night Blooming Cereus was actually used as the basis for the cover art on last summer's book *Queen of the Night*. Some of the people we saw that night are neighbors in Tucson who live just

up the street. When given the opportunity to speak, I told them how much I appreciated being welcomed home, but it was that night, when I was being introduced by a fellow Friends board member, Arch Brown, that I learned that the Alumni of the Year award was granted for the first time in 1947. I am only the 100th recipient.

Were I a regular denizen of the university, I would have known about the traditional President's Dinner, hosted by the president of the university the night before graduation for people who will be on the VIP platform the next day. By the time I found out about it, we had already made arrangements to have dinner with out of town guests. I also managed to miss the memo about people in the "President's Platform Group" wearing black closed-toed shoes. I had heels along, but I put them on and knew they weren't going to cut it for the long walk from the library to the gym, so I opted for comfort and showed up in a pair of gold sandals. As my mother would have said, "Stand alone; eventually the crowd may fall."

Graduation was inspiring to me, and I hope it was inspirational for the graduates as well. The guy who sang the "Star Spangled Banner," had the range to do it, and his rendition gave me goosebumps. Ditto for the young woman who sang "You'll Never Walk Alone" from Carousel. The commencement speaker, Betsy Bayless, graduated from the U of A the same year I did, 1966, and encountered many of the same obstacles, none of which kept her from being elected attorney general for the State of Arizona. The only thing that surprised me is that she wasn't one of my fellow residents at Pima Hall.

Between 2000 and now, someone has FIRMLY discouraged the flinging of flour tortillas at graduation in favor of flinging confetti. And I was especially moved by the enthusiasm of the people, mostly women, from the Nursing College, who graduated, in white old fashioned white nurses caps instead of traditional mortar boards. Not too many years ago, the nursing college at the University of Arizona was devastated by tragedy when a gunman murdered three professors before turning the gun on himself. When those graduating nursing students cheered, I cheered.

After graduation, we went back to the house where an oddball collection of friends and relations, including five former Pima Hall girls, showed up to celebrate. All in all, it was a terrific party.

Today, Sunday afternoon, we're headed back home on Alaska Airlines with Bella, our former stray, snoozing in her Snoozer Roll-Aboard case under the seat in front of us. In the waiting room we were honored to spend time with Dr. John Thompson, the oncologist from the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance and the University of Washington who oversaw our son-in-law's nine year battle with malignant melanoma. It was Dr. Thompson's efforts, combined with Dr. Cassian Yee's T-cell protocol, and Dr. David Byrd's talent as a surgeon that kept Jon going four years after his original doctors said he'd be gone. And those four extra years allowed for the arrival of our last-minute miracle grandson, five year-old Colt Stephen.

I had met Dr. Thompson years ago when Jon was still alive, but during that tough time, I don't believe I ever managed to express my gratitude to him for what he and his colleagues did for Jon and for our whole family. And so today, as he and his family made their way home from celebrating their son's graduation, we had a chance to visit with him. I'm ashamed to admit this, but we behaved like regular grandparents anywhere, proudly showing off our collection of grandkid photos. (For those of you who think writers live isolated "hermit-like" existences, get over it. We're regular people with regular lives. We love our grandkids and our dogs and will brag about them and show you photos at the drop of a hat.)

So I'm sitting on an airplane with my computer--a slick brand new MacBook Air with six hours of battery life--on my lap and thinking my life is pretty much perfect. Soon, though, I'm going to have to get my nose back to the grindstone and find out what Ali Reynolds has been up to in the meantime, but for right now, I'm still dealing with real life.

And with living happily ever after.

Nina Totenberg

Friday, December 24, 2010

Last week NPR commentator Nina Totenberg apologized for using the apparently offensive word "Christmas" on the air. Here's the note I sent to Nina this morning in care of NPR's home page. If I receive a personal reply, I'll certainly pass it along. Since the automated response said, "Thank you for contacting All Songs Considered," I'm not exactly holding my breath.

Dear Nina Totenberg,

Today is Christmas Eve. Our younger grandkids will be hanging their stockings with care. The older ones will simply be waiting and hoping.

A few weeks ago, our grandson helped put together the creche on the buffet in our dining room. Accidents do happen. Unfortunately one of the three wise men fell on the floor and had to have his head glued back on, but now he's almost as good as new. Colt had a good handle on just who Baby Jesus was. And it was clear to him that Mary was Baby Jesus's mommy, but when he asked if Joseph was Jesus's daddy, the reply was, "That's a long story." Because it is. Some people buy that "long story" and some people don't. But just because some people don't doesn't mean they get to rain on my parade.

A few days later, when I picked him up from school, Colt wanted to know if we celebrated Hanukkah. I said, "No." Colt is five. The next question was: "Why not?" I said, "Because we're not Jewish." The next question was: "What's Jewish?" One of the nicest things about being a grandmother is being able to dodge tough questions.

"You need to ask your mother," I told him, thereby cheerfully throwing my daughter under the holiday bus.

But here's the thing. When I send out my "holiday" letter, I send it to the people who get Hanukah cards as well as to the people who get Christmas cards. There are members of my family who don't celebrate Christmas the same way we do. I send them cards, too, along with my best wishes. If they throw them away, that's okay. And this year, I threw away a card myself--after I had addressed it--because it would have gone to a young woman who recently and unexpectedly lost her husband. She did NOT need anybody else wishing her a Merry Christmas. Her Christmas this year is anything but merry.

I LOVE sending and receiving Christmas cards. And I love getting the one Hanukah card that comes to me from my good friend in Alaska. I'm not offended by being wished a Happy Hanukah. (Hanukah was especially happy for us this year. No wind and no snow!) And I'm not offended by people who celebrate Kwanza, either, although I don't believe anyone has ever sent me a Happy Kwanza card, at least not so far.

Yesterday, Bill and I sat here together, reading the Christmas cards and letters, remembering how the people who had sent them to us had impacted our lives over the years, enjoying their good news; mourning their bad news. Yes, we maybe hear from some of these folks only once a year, but they're all part of the fabric of our lives, and Christmas gives us a time and an excuse to stay in touch.

So have a Merry Christmas, Nina, and I'm not apologizing for saying so. You may not celebrate Christmas, but I hope that day is especially fine for you--that the sun shines on you; that your heart is lifted up; and that you'll be able to spend time with people you love.

That's what we'll be doing at our house.

A Christmas Miracle

Wednesday, December 29, 2010

Answering e-mails is part of my job description. It's something I do every day, Sundays and holidays included. It's something I don't delegate to anyone else. The people who are writing to say something about my books or my blogs are writing to me, for good or ill, and I feel an obligation to respond to those notes in a polite and timely fashion.

I even took the high ground once and responded politely to a lady named Melissa G. who wrote to me saying that, from looking at my photo, she realized I was in desperate need of surgical intervention from a qualified plastic surgeon prior to my next book tour and that she hoped when I was out in public that I wore a bag over my head so as not to frighten my readers.

That, by the way, is pretty much a direct quote from her note to me. Some e-mails are more memorable than others. She wasn't and isn't someone who is in my database as one of my regular readers. In case this story is sounding a bit familiar, you should remember that writers usually get to have the last laugh. In *Edge of Evil* Ali Reynolds receives almost a verbatim copy of that e-mail, addressed to her at her fictional website, cutlooseblog.com. Unlike me, Ali's fans all weighed in on the subject, telling the fictional Melissa G. exactly where she should go and what she should do with her unkind remarks.

But back to my daily collection of e-mails. I answer them individually. I don't have a set of answers lingering in some file somewhere so that all I have to do is push a button. Yes, there are some regularly used phrases that I can type accurately with my eyes closed, but each e-mail is answered individually, typed by me with my own little fingers.

A week or so ago, I received an e-mail with a subject line that said: Christmas Miracle, 2008. I half expected it to be one of those beautiful Jacqui Lawson cyber greeting cards, but it wasn't. It was a heartfelt letter from a woman who shall remain anonymous. For ease of writing, I'm going to call her Jane.

Jane said she wrote to me in the fall of 2008 when her family was struggling with health issues. Her father was drifting into the fog of Alzheimer's and his sister, Jane's aunt who was one of my most devoted fans, was losing a long battle with cancer. Jane said that in response to her e-mail request I sent a letter to her aunt, e-mailing it through the niece's e-mail address. On Christmas Eve, as they sat down to dinner, Jane read the letter aloud to her aunt, giving her my greeting and making her aunt smile one of the last smiles anyone ever saw from her. Then, Jane's father stood up and said grace.

Jane said that for the next little while and through the course of the dinner it was like she had them both back. Her aunt died a few weeks later and her father passed on a few months after that. Jane says she still struggles with the grief of losing them but that, in her heart, I will always be part of their family's Christmas Miracle of 2008.

Whoa!!!

I don't remember what I said in the letter, and it doesn't matter. Writing to Jane's aunt was a small bit of kindness, and having Jane let me know how much my note meant to her and to her family was another small bit of kindness in return. That whole exchange is something to remember the next time someone like Melissa G. sends me a nastygram, or as I sometimes call them, an e-mal.

At this time of year it's good to remember that old saying about what goes around really does come around. We'll all be better off if we're sending out good stuff instead of bad stuff, because the bad stuff just might come back and bite us.

Speaking of which. Since I wrote my last blog update, I've learned I was wrong. It turns out Nina Totenburg's so-called Christmas apology was aimed at the people hosting the

so-called HOLIDAY party Nina was attending at the time. She was actually TWEAKING the purveyors of political correctness rather than delivering same. In other words, my earlier blog posting may have done a disservice to Nina, but my good wishes for her at the end of the blog are unchanged. Well, no, maybe they are. In addition to what I said earlier, I want to wish her and her family a very Happy New Year.

And a Happy New Year to everyone else as well.

Keep reading, and I'll keep writing.