

Scarlet Letters

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From left to right: Jane Kentnor Dean, Laura Ginsburg Strauss, Ellen Bush Gartner, Terry Larson Scheetz at the 55th reunion of the Wellesley Class of 1956. Photo by Toni Holland Liebman.

Scarlet Letters, a journal for the Wellesley College Class of 1956, features essays, poetry, and reviews of class members' books. *Scarlet Letters* aims to foster interaction among Fifty-Sixers and to encourage them to write. Class members are invited to submit short pieces, up to a page and a half single spaced, in such categories as first memory, significant Wellesley experience, travel commentary, work experience, and humor. An ongoing effort will be the production of our own obituaries while we still have time to revise them! *Scarlet Letters* will be available quarterly online at the class website. Copies will be sent online to class members with email addresses and by mail to those without.

This issue features the writing and art of Carolyn Evans, Ester Rota Gasparoni, Nora Macfarlane Nevin, Heidi Nitze, Isabelle Clore Plaster, Margaret Daniel Russell, and Madeline Tiger

Some Thoughts on Aging Written on a Post-seventy-fifth Birthday

And only yesterday we were so young,
We sang songs that now go unsung,
We lived our life with careless glee,
We were happy simply to be.
The future beckoned with golden hues
And all life's promises seemed to be true.
No danger threatened our carefree stroll,
We never thought that we would get old.
Now as we look at life slipping away
And watch our hair as it's turning gray,
We think back on the days when we were young
Wishing we could remember the songs that we had sung.

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Election Night Party at Wellesley

It was a great party — for a while.

In October, when Wellesley announced an election night party, the response was overwhelming. Reservations soon exceeded the capacity of Alumnae Hall so the location was shifted to the Keohane Field House. I had not expected to go, but when Ann Becker Behravesh '72 offered me a ride, I could not resist. Mention of a light wheel chair made it an even better prospect, in view of my September hip replacement.

We were five: Ann, '72; her sister-in-law, Angie Pao, '73; Gloria Dole Amirault, '88; and Marilyn Becker, Ann's other sister-in-law and our church organist. (Incidentally, my woodwind quintet played for Angie's wedding at the College Club).

We went early, for good parking and a meal. The Wang Student Center was new to the others, but familiar to me from my teaching years. One commented that she didn't yet feel that she was at Wellesley, because the setting was unfamiliar.

We had heard some ideas about dress: one was to wear white, for suffragists. At the Wang center, we saw several alums from fifteen to twenty years ago with sweaters and pearls. We had white sweaters, and items in our class colors. My red 1956 cap was a hit all evening.

On to the Field House. It is an immense structure with a high peaked steel roof and cement floor, a real echo chamber. There are bleachers at one end, and seats were set up at the other end in front of a large TV screen. It was visible throughout the place, and had a volume to compete with the crowd. Tables were scattered in the middle, each with blue and white balloons and a class number on the strings. The rest of the area was filled with noisy crowds of Hillary supporters of all ages, mostly younger ones. Attendance was estimated at 2000.

The College gave a good party. Food was plentiful: chips, dips, wraps, crudité's, cupcakes, soft drinks, even wine and beer. The cupcakes were frosted in blue and red, with two-inch pieces of crystallized sugar, for the "glass ceiling." Staff and students roamed the crowded room with baskets of popcorn, campaign buttons, and small triangular flags. Mes-



sages were: Election night 2016 Wellesley Watches, 2016 Making the Impossible Possible, 2016 History in the Making (too true).

On one wall was a photo set-up with two large posters of campus scenes for backgrounds and life-size cutouts of Hillary and Tim Kaine. I parked my chair at the bleachers, next to my friends and close to the entrance. We could see people as they came in, graduates of all ages, many with partners and surprisingly many with babies in strollers. One stroller had a tray on the handle for food, some were decorated with signs, and another wisely had aqua sound protection earphones for the baby. The dress varied from a few elegant suits, suitable for breaking ceilings, to the totally informal garb of more recent graduates.

There was much excitement because of Hillary, but there was also the happy atmosphere of reunions with shrieks and hugs as classmates connected. I had my own reunion with some former music students, but there was even more. Alums entered, saw my red '56 hat and boa, and members of other "red" classes wanted to make a connection with ours. I wish you all could have been there to share the hugs and photos.

The celebration continued for a couple of hours, with loud television coverage of results, interspersed with messages from alums, including Lynn Sherr '63, and Skypes from Madeleine Albright '59 and Diana Chapman Walsh '66. Our new president, Paula Johnson, was there in person.

(continued on page 5)

HEIDI NITZE

POETRY AND ART



And Sometimes Thief

I am elder
I am child
I am storm
I am still pool tide.

I am grief
and disbelief,
joy and mischief,
and sometimes thief.

10/ 08/ 2001

Talking with Animals

Dolphin speaks in squeaks
They say; Lion roars
And Snake hisses,
But I know that from beaks
And jaws of these more's
There that man misses.
Now maybe God's power
Must be to show us how
The animals may speak to man
And teach him fair his place
In Life's Great Plan.

10/ 01/ 1991

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Design by Laurel Marx

The Tale of the Traveling Panties

Never did I think that doing the laundry at college would span more than fifty years, but it did. It wasn't a chore. We dissolved into laughter. Just doing the laundry?

Three of us shared a suite in Stone Hall during our junior year—Donna Klann Mueller, Sue Johnstone Bensing, and me. We had an idyllic set-up. Two bedrooms and a full bath in a sunny corner area of the dorm, overlooking the Wellesley campus, including Lake Waban.

To save time and energy, we decided that we'd share doing our laundry. It was only personal stuff as the college supplied our bed and bath linens (for a fee, but it was convenient). Each week, one of us would take all the dirty clothes to the laundry room, put them in the washer, and then hang them on a clothesline in a hot drying room. Later we'd go back to collect the dried clothes. Easy, and only once every three weeks.

Sometimes the drying room clotheslines were filled with other girls' garments. We'd have to do some moving, shifting, or folding to make room for our things. We could always identify what was ours. If we missed something, we would collect it later. Amazingly, we never lost anything. All the students were respectful of others' property.

When I came back from doing a batch one evening, we discovered an extra pair of girl's pink panties with lace edging. The underwear didn't belong to any of us, so we put it back into the laundry bag. The next week, Donna washed all the clothes, including the panties and hung everything on the lines. Taking down our dry clothes, she found the lone panties. She left them there, hoping the owner would see them and make a claim.

No such luck. We tried to do the responsible thing. We put a note on the dorm bulletin board announcing that there was some unclaimed lingerie in the laundry drying room, in case someone was missing something. The poor garment was ignored. We brought it back to our rooms.

We were a bit suspicious of each other, assuming one of us was the owner and didn't want to claim

them. I have no idea why. They were just ordinary underpants. One evening, after we put away our own clothes and the panties were again left alone, Donna, Sue, and I decided to close our eyes, and with no one watching, the owner of the pants would grab them and put them in her drawer and then we'd open our eyes and no one would know who had rescued them.

We played our little game. When we opened our eyes, the panties were still there. We put them back into the laundry bag, washed and dried them, and brought them back to our room. Then we'd start to hide them in each other's drawers or closet. When discovered, they'd go back into the laundry bag. They started to look a bit dingy, even with all the washing.

The school year was coming to the end. The question of the panties came up. We decided to leave them in the laundry room.

Sue and her Bud were getting married in June, a few weeks after school finished. Donna and I were going to be bridesmaids in her wedding. I suggested to Donna that we put the panties in our things without Sue's knowledge. We'd take them to the wedding and when she was leaving for the honeymoon trip, we'd slip them into her purse just before she left. We wrote the wedding date in ink across the back of the pants. The joke would be on her when she opened her purse and found the ownerless underwear.

We got the expected telephone call a few hours later. Sue was not happy that she ended up with the panties.

Donna and Jack married and then Bill and I, and we started having babies. When Donna's first son was born, she received a baby gift from Sue. It was the panties. Sue had added the dates of Donna's and my weddings on the pants, along with Donna's baby's birthdate.

The panties went back and forth for other babies' births, and then I got them when I turned thirty. Each recipient kept the undies around until she could surprise one of the others for some occasion. And we'd try to disguise the package. Astonishment was the name of our game.

Once, foul was called. I had just received the pink bundle from Sue for something, but sent them back to her right away for another big event in her life.

Now, that was a shock. We had been letting several years go between receiving and then sending out again.

The reason for each gifting of the panties was inscribed in ink on the fabric. Someone added little plastic babies. There were black bows for mourning a thirtieth or fortieth birthday. Pearls and sequin rosettes were attached, too. Birth dates, anniversaries, children's wedding dates—you name it, everything was included.

In 2005 Sue and Bud were having their fiftieth wedding anniversary. By this time, Donna and I had each been long divorced, so fifty years was a big event for all of us. I sent the panties to their son and asked him to include them in his gift to his parents.

Our game came to a halt when Donna died in late 2009 and Sue in 2010, after a lingering illness. I wondered if Sue had sent the pants to Donna for her seventy-fifth birthday. Donna didn't mention it, but she wasn't communicating much by then.

It was priceless to have had this ritual that kept us fast friends. No matter how we would whine about getting the panties as a "gift," the memories that they summoned were the greatest gift of all.

On my next birthday, in 2011, I received a package in the mail from Sue's husband. It was the panties. She had packed them in the box, I am sure, with a chuckle. She may have been the first to have them, but she wasn't going to be the last.

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Donna, Sue, and Carolyn, 1953, being silly.

(Election Night Party, continued)

You know how things progressed. Originally many were coming in, few leaving, but by 10 pm those leaving outnumbered the arrivals and the crowd was becoming thinner. The roar was a little quieter, and the celebratory mood gradually disappeared. We stayed for a while, encouraged by small gains, hoping for a change, but finally had to accept that this was not to be. Television coverage showed weeping alums, some with their daughters, and many comforting each other.

Our group decided to leave around 11:30. The car was quiet on the way home.

Media reported that after midnight the staff packed up the refreshments, and just before 1:30, President Johnson spoke to the remaining supporters. She said, in part, "Whatever the result, we stand for justice. We stand for pursuit of knowledge based on fact. We stand for equality for everyone, no matter your gender, your race, your social orientation, or your religion, no matter what country you're from or what your immigration status is. We must be part of the momentum that takes us forward from here."

Shortly before Donald Trump was elected president, the news feed was closed and all went home.

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The infamous panties

Monuments & Clouds

—for Homer, at 37, 2004

The new growth on your yew, the box-shaped bush,
clipped, blooms green.

A tiny worm wiggles only half his half-inch length
next to the extra pebble I lay on the narrow granite
ledge.

He collects dust bits, it seems
he doesn't leave life alone.

A huge hawk just left his perch on a branch
not far from the walk past the edge of
these rows of imposing stones
to soar squawking among monuments,

the hard signs of the dead
buried under proud family names
here and here and there, their tall rectangles
declaring them to hawk and air.

The monuments are set
on thick flat pedestals
marking territory—each great bite of earth.

It's always hard
to find your low sleeping stone, Homer,
the one I chose by myself
and ordered inscribed Beloved son
and brother and friend, 1967–1989,

modestly marked for
perpetual care so when I'm not here
someone will see
that the boxwood over your bones
is clipped square.



And then there'll be my own (ashes)
to tend. And it will be OK for both of us
that nobody comes to lay out
the row of pebbles along the ledge of the
headstone,
little stone by stone by stone to lie
there as if
everyone remembered
birthdays and death days and would
want to gamble as I do with you,
and being unable to pray to say
in silence what may be a song
that sings, you are not alone
we are not alone.

The evening birds have joined
a little song across Newark,
the low land of your birth,
and the great rivers—Passaic, Hudson.
Far, there, the city you loved rises
north of the space you would have grieved
where the towers in your photographs don't exist
now. Gray monuments uptown replicate the
shapes
of tombstones, staunch dwellings.
Some scrape the sky.

The tallest one, the Empire State, spires into mist.
Clouds obscure it, then lift, and it comes
easily clear.

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*This poem appears in Madeline Tiger's recent book,
In the Clearing (Dos Madres Press, 2016).*

Sixth Grade

Sixth grade was the worst year of my entire childhood. On the first day of school in September 1945, I was a little girl of ten, playing with dolls and electric trains, dressing up in discarded curtains and my mother's high heels. By June, I was a jaded eleven-year-old who didn't trust anyone, even my own parents.

Back to September. We lived in a leafy development of pretty clapboard Capes and somewhat larger Colonials, each on its nicely landscaped quarter-acre. Our house was a ten-minute walk to the local elementary school. My best friend—indeed my only friend—Pattee, lived halfway to school, just up the street. We were both of sturdy builds (pre-adolescent, neither slender nor chubby; “squat” might be appropriate); she had red curly hair and I had blond straight hair which my mother plaited every morning into two elastic-tied braids. Pattee wore dresses with peplums; I wore plaid pleated skirts. To school, that is. When I came home from school I changed from my school clothes into my play clothes, which tended to be slightly shrunken, possibly ragged sweaters and old, too-short skirts.

Mostly Pattee and I played at her house, which was considerably bigger than ours. She also had more of everything than I did; I had one Story-Book doll to her five. I didn't like her mother much, because she was stupid. She pronounced “grimy” as grimmy. I didn't dare correct her. I couldn't stand her father (he was a show-off, something a parent should never be), and in truth, I don't think I liked Pattee all that much either. First, there was her name. Why couldn't she spell it Patty, or Pattie, like other girls did; that double *ee* was an affectation as far as my ten-year-old opinionated self was concerned. And she was bossy, something a friend should never be. She dictated what we would do when I came to play, whether it would be undressing and dressing those dolls, or jump-rope, or making cookies. I went along, it was her house. But we tolerated each other and got along pretty well. Until....

The first crack in this sort-of friendship came when she invited me to a tea party. It was to be on a Saturday, at noon. I had no idea what a tea party consisted of, and instantly forgot the invitation. Then one Saturday shortly after noon Pattee phoned to remind me that her party was in progress and that the other guests were all there and where was I. I was probably crayoning in my coloring books or reading Nancy Drew but, mortified, I left the house in my play clothes—a pale blue sweater with a significant moth hole in one sleeve, and a navy blue

too-short skirt. I tore up to her house to discover, to my mortification, Pattee and her mother and several other girls, dressed in party dresses. I might as well have been naked, or wrapped in burlap. I didn't fit in. I was that shabby little girl from down the street who didn't know what to wear to a tea party and was late besides.

I don't remember anything after that except wishing that I were home with my book and my crayons and my pure-bred Springer Spaniel and my stupid little sister who was not even my friend.

Obviously the tea party came to an end, as did that Saturday. But the incident was far from over. My memory is far from sharp on this now, but before long Pattee started to ignore me. She wasn't there when I stopped by on my way to school. She wasn't there when I knocked on my way home. Her mother was distinctly cool. No, I don't know when she'll be home. No, she is busy next Saturday. The gravity of my faux pas began to sink in. I had made a mistake that no apology, no matter how heartfelt, would resolve. This was new in my little-girlhood, and I had no idea how to handle it.

Then the retaliation started in earnest. Not only did Pattee ignore me, all those tea party guests did, too. Not only did they ignore me, they banded together like a posse, new best friends united against Nora, and ignored me collectively. It got worse; they started calling me names. They weren't dirty or shameful names (it was 1945, after all, when damn was the worst swearword in anyone's vocabulary); the only one I remember distinctly was “butterball.” “Fatso” could have been another, or Bucket of Lard, but what struck me most was how unfair these names were. I was no fatter than squat little Pattee in her girth-emphasizing peplums, and Edith was fatter. We were ten lumpy years old, and there wasn't a beauty among us.

But the names hurt. The isolation hurt worse. It was time to tell my mother. Bad move. Clearly she didn't remember sixth grade, or her humiliation came from other sources (she was the middle child of five), because she laughed it off.

“Just tell them that butter is very expensive,” she joked lightly. I had had no idea how terrible it would feel to have my own mother misunderstand—no, to have no idea how miserable I was. But she didn't “get it,” to use a phrase I didn't know then. She had absolutely no idea.

So with no one else to turn to, I became a loner. I took long bicycle rides by myself, undressed and dressed my nurse doll, Carol, in her limited wardrobe; learned to play solitaire, read every Nancy Drew, took the dog for

longer walks than I'd ever taken, and avoided Pattee's house, and Noel's and Janet's, for the rest of the year. I could trust me, I wouldn't betray me, I understood me. And a loner I would be, when things weren't going well in my life, for the rest of my days.

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My "Wild and Precious Life"

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" asks the well-known American poet Mary Oliver. It's pretty clear that for me, with my gray hair, the question should be "What is it you planned to do . . ." Well, I didn't really plan. I expected life to happen—and lo and behold, it did!

Then how can I answer Mary Oliver's question? It's an extravagant one that seems to demand a passionate response. I will be a spectacular mountain climber . . . win the Tour de France . . . be a prima ballerina. I will be a lawyer and defend social causes. I will be a poet and myth maker. I will make a fortune and use it to solve the world's problems.

I can't make that kind of response now.

But the poem suggests, follow your bliss, no matter what your age. You have one life and it is indeed precious. Go with whatever calls you. Cast aside the conventional, the ordinary. No matter what stage we're in, we yearn to be caught up in some larger purpose, to feel the adrenalin rush of acting for what we believe in.

Carlo Rovelli in his book *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*, tells us that "Albert Einstein [in his youth] spent a year loafing aimlessly. You don't get anywhere by not 'wasting' time," Rovelli comments. He continues, "Albert was reading Kant and attending occasional lectures at the University of Pavia: for pleasure, without being registered there or having to think about exams. It is thus that serious scientists are made."

And so Rovelli makes the case for pondering . . . musing . . . dreaming, as necessary for achievement. Oliver, too, makes the dreaming and pondering a necessity for all of us, whatever our situation. She writes, "I don't know exactly what prayer is. I do know how to pay attention . . . how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, which is what I have been doing all day. What else should I have done?"

She doesn't suggest that she should idly and blessedly stroll through the fields every day of her life, making a career of it. Instead, to me, she's saying, whoever you are, whatever you do, wherever you are in life, be sure that you find time to stroll through the fields, paying attention, being in awe of swans and black bears and grasshoppers, becoming a part of this wild and precious world.

Whether you're lucky enough to be caught up in work to which you are called OR you are pressing routinely forward as the days require; whether you have an unswerving drive toward a goal OR you're still not sure what you want to be when you grow up, the question pertains. Your wild and precious life needs tending. Stop and think about it. Stop and Be. What daring ideas!

Oliver says the news is good, that even at my age, I can still plan to find, renew, sustain my one wild and precious life. So that's what I'm going to do: ask myself—and answer—the question again and again.

That's my response. Of course, we'll all have differing answers, but wherever you are in the course of your existence, keep on asking yourself the question.

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