

The truth is...we gather on the Third Monday of each month to practice our writing skills. We listen and share in each other's work. We are small in number and our commitment is strictly to produce and foster creativity among our members.

We started in July 1999 and consist of adults that enjoy writing memoirs, commentaries, essays, poems, and/or prose. Our simple method each month is to use a pre-selected word or phrase as the basis of a story, an idea, an opinion, a derivative of, or an implied essence of and write a 1 to 1 ½ page document. We share our stories, comment, and in that way build up our writing skills through practice and presentation. The atmosphere is friendly and supportive, and the feedback is gentle.

Curious? Always wanted to try writing for fun, entertainment, or even profit? Come visit with us at any of our open meetings. Bring a sample of your work. Sit in and see what we do. If you like it, join us every month and become a member. Contact Nancy at nestewart@ameritech.net to zoom with us during COVID restrictions.

Original Works by Members of the Pen & Ink Writers' Group
© 2022 Pen & Ink Writers' Group

January Word Selection – Magical

Dear Santa
By Vicki Elberfeld

I hope you don't think I am only writing this because I want something. This is not one of those "gimme" kinds of letters. You have been an important presence in my life from the get-go. Now that I am old, I really don't need you to bring me toys, and I can buy my own electronics, thank you very much. I'd simply like to thank you for all the hard work and thought you've devoted to me, my friends, and children throughout the world. I dearly hope you enjoy your work, and I wanted to let you know you are appreciated.

By the way, you look marvelous, your hair so nicely curled and combed and the same with your bushy white beard. I love the red in your cheeks, the blue in your sparkling eyes and your warm smile, so inviting. How I wish we could meet in person! In your pictures you always look so huggable, and I would hug you for so long you'd miss most of your deliveries! Once I saw the tip of your black boot as you ascended through the chimney. I make sure to put the fire out before midnight every Christmas Eve for your safety. I hope you're not on a diet, because I'll leave you some Amaretto balls (like rum balls only with Amaretto instead) along with your milk. Although truth to tell I really think you are old enough for coffee which goes much better with a chocolate dessert. And if I were you, I'd want some caffeine for the long and difficult night ahead.

So, coffee it will be. Oh Santa, how I envy you, traveling all around the world while I, thanks to this pandemic, mainly stay home. As I was exposed, little more than a week ago, to a friend who developed Covid two days after our lunch, I am confined to my house for several more days. What a drag! Although I love going to my Google Earth app and traveling, with the help of many images, to exotic places virtually. I've even been to your North Pole!

I couldn't find your house though. You could see my house on Google Earth, yet I can't see yours, but then my address is way more specific. I figure your house must be very, very big because you need so much room for storage of tools, materials, packing boxes, and presents. Plus you must have quite a secretarial staff to read all your mail, order supplies and materials, and match up toys with children's names and addresses. I do hope whoever reads this, sets it aside, as he or she does every year, for your personal perusal.

Santa, can you weave baskets? Oh, what am I saying, of course you can! If not, ask one of your elves to show you how. I tried it myself at a park district workshop, and it was very fun! The only problem I had was that the reeds I was working with cut my poor fingers. I wonder how the rumor got started that basket weaving was a popular activity in insane asylums. But perhaps it isn't a rumor after all; perhaps it's really true! And we must consider the possibility that the very act of weaving baskets sooner or later drives one crazy. Anyway, I figured if I had some pretty baskets, I could store all my stuff in them, and the house wouldn't look such a mess!

Or better yet, lend me your elves for a week or two. They could sort my papers, vacuum my floors, and have my whole house looking spic and span, so I wouldn't be embarrassed to have anybody over. It would give me so much joy to be able to host a party and gather my friends together again after this long pandemic separation.

Oh Santa, but I would be even happier if, instead of your elves, I cleaned it myself, and could gaze on my kitchen and living room with pride as my major Christmas accomplishment. Even if I can't have friends over right away, at least I could look forward to a time when clutter wouldn't be an excuse to not entertain.

As the biggest holiday of the year approaches, memories of my whole family, deceased and much missed parents, aunts, and uncles included, come swarming in. Of course, there were the tough parts, of Mom wanting all the help we could give her and more for this extravagant and much anticipated holiday. There was the baking of the Christmas cookies, covering them with colored sugars and chocolate sprinkles and sliced green and red cherries to add bows to the wreath cookies, along with those little silver balls which stood for ornaments on the tree cookies or for buttons on the gingerbread men. The smell of the baking cookies drove me wild, and I was always allowed to eat the overcooked ones and, better still, the end of the batch of yummy raw dough with too little to properly form anything bakeable. Of course, my favorite ritual was the licking of the pan.

And of course, there would be the shopping along with the associated festive activities such as going downtown to State Street, viewing the windows of Marshall Field's and Carson's and Wieboldt's with winter and Christmas scenes of snow falling, people well dressed and feasting,

and of course ballerinas dancing in scenes from the Nutcracker Suite. Some lucky years Mom even took me to see the Nutcracker live, while other years we simply watched it on TV. We'd buy hot caramel corn from a little store on Madison Avenue, and though the lines were very, very long, certain years we had lunch in the Walnut room around the big tree at Marshall Field's. Then we'd go downstairs to gourmet foods and purchase delicious shortbread. And of course, a visit to Marshall Field's wouldn't be complete without checking out toys and games, from dolls with incredibly beautiful clothes to scientific "toys" such as microscopes which always had a leaf or a bug on a slide to view in the most incredible detail.

We had to work hard for Christmas, Santa. Oh, I know you work very hard, not for yourself but for us, and even as a child I understood Christmas was an exhausting day. Mom had to shop and clean, and sometimes she lost her temper. Oh, but she'd get her temper back soon enough, and then apologize like crazy and maybe even cry, saying she was so stressed and tired, but she didn't mean to spoil our holiday. In the midst of all the baking and shopping for gifts, Mom put so much energy into her caroling party, where we would carol a few neighbors and shut-ins and then move on to what we called "the old folks home" where we'd walk through the halls caroling.

Mom and Grandma and my aunt and I spent our days leading up to the party crocheting the plastic rings we received around the necks of gallon milk bottles with green yarn for wreaths, adding a tiny red bow and a pin in the back to be worn by the ladies of the old folks' home. What did we do for the gents? Oh dear, I fear we left them out entirely!

At the end of our caroling, we'd come home for our party. Some folks responded to Mom's invites by saying they couldn't come for the caroling, however they could actually manage to swing by later for the party, but Mother was very strict, "no caroling, no party," she'd say, and those sluggards were not allowed to join us!

At the party the children were excited to break the piñata and scramble to gather up all the candy. And not only the children! One lady was so excited and struck with such force that her stick bounced off the piñata and struck her in the face; she was bruised and bleeding, but she kept on striking! After the candy was more or less evenly distributed, by persuading the older kids with bigger hands for grabbing to relinquish some, we'd go in the house for punch and a few simple games such as guessing the number of candies in a large, transparent cylindrical beaker, while mom and a neighbor girl she hired put the finishing touches on supper. Then we feasted finishing with some of the delicious Christmas cookies we hadn't been allowed to touch in days! Our friends and relatives really looked forward to this party, and showed their appreciation by giving us cookies, candies, fruits, brandy, and beautiful CDs of Christmas carols and songs.

But Christmas morning was my favorite, and it's what I miss most about the holiday. While Mom and her parents used to open gifts on Christmas Eve, it was very important to Dad that we honor his tradition by exchanging presents in the morning. The presents we kids got from our parents were mainly wrapped. I'd tear at the paper when opening them, but I would always save the pretty bows, so we could use them again for future Christmases. Mom and Dad sometimes gave me clothes but not you, Santa, never you. You knew that I always loved toys the best. I'll

never forget the large colored bells you gave me, each color representing a different musical note. I would lay them down in a line with their handles facing me, pick them up one by one, and shake them. I would have to follow the color-coded printed music of various carols, and I would use the bells to play songs. My favorite, of course, was Jingle Bells which allowed me to shake the bells multiple times as I sang the words.

My dollhouse was also a thoughtful gift from you, Santa, and I have kept it all these years. It was a ranch house, just like our house, which I have resided in now for over half a century. I loved the miniature tables, plates, chairs, beds, and even a living room with a fireplace just like ours! There was also a garage for two tiny cars, and a teeny, tiny family which lived in that house. How thoughtful of you, Santa! After we opened our gifts and put away the bulk of the paper and bows, we settled down to our festive breakfast, *polačinki*, thin pancakes rolled with jam or cottage cheese with cinnamon and sugar, thereby honoring my mother's Slovak heritage. And it wouldn't be Christmas breakfast without the hard, only half thawed, melon balls of cantaloupe and honeydew. But the crowning touch was always dessert, the only time of the year we had dessert with breakfast. It was English pudding, more of a fruitcake really, with plums and raisins baked for us by one of Mom's friends. Mom would make a warm sauce of melted butter, powdered sugar, and brandy, pour it over the pudding, and Dad would strike a match and light the sauce, making flames come out of our desert. I can't say I ever had much love for fruitcakes and their variations, but the flames of the fire and the butter and sugar made this particular dish so exciting and tasty!

So, Santa, I realize you can't bring my parents or my aunt and uncle back from the dead or end the pandemic or make me young again. But I feel young, Santa, in my heart. And I will get together with my cousins and my brother and celebrate in a local restaurant and tell stories of Christmas past and present. I don't need more material things, Santa, I really don't, but you will bestow upon me this year and, hopefully, for many, many more years to come the most precious gift of all, my memories.

Thank you, Santa.

Love,

Vicki (Elberfeld)

###

Magical
By Edward J. Scheffler

As magic offers illusions of mistaken reality -
A phenomenalism that secretes sightings onto
shadows of the abstract.

I've looked at life from both sides now.
From win and lose and still somehow,
It's life illusion I recall.

I really don't know life at all.

--Joni Mitchell, "Both Sides Now"

###

Maybe It's Magical

By Carol Karvon

There's something magical about Christmas. Even for the non-believers among us, there's something contagious in the atmosphere. People seem to be friendlier and nicer. Even the air feels softer. Maybe it's magic. Maybe it's wishful thinking. Maybe it's just my imagination.

For Holly, ever since she was a little girl, the Christmas season always seemed to be her own personal birthday celebration. Holly's birthday was three days before Christmas, December 22nd

Holly was thinking about how lucky she was to be born so close to Christmas. Others might have felt left out, forgotten, amid all the holiday celebrations, but not Holly. Her parents always made sure to treat her birthday as special so it wouldn't get lost in all the Christmas hoopla.

Maybe it was because she was born during the holiday season and her mom and dad called her Holly and thought of her as their Christmas gift, but couldn't call her "gift," nor could they call her "miracle," even though that's how they thought of their baby girl. They thought she was special and destined for greatness.

Holly was an only child born in her parents' 20th year of marriage. They had long given up hoping and praying for a baby to enhance their lives. After so many years passing and never knowing the joy of having their own child, they contented themselves with being the best aunt and uncle their many nieces and nephews could ever have. Both of Holly's parents had come from large families and had numerous siblings. They always had children in their lives but never their own, at least not until they were blessed with their own wonderful baby girl.

At times in the past, they even celebrated the fact of being a couple and told themselves they were free to pursue other interests besides raising children, such as travel, or impromptu late night theater performances, or intimate suppers. They didn't have to deal with dirty diapers or mysterious illnesses with fevers, or even painful teething, like some of their friends. They never admitted, even to each other, any disappointment they felt. This was the life they had been dealt and would not complain. For the most part they were content and comfortable with the life they had; both were successful at their careers and well regarded in their chosen fields; he in education and she in health care.

Holly tried hard to maintain some degree of independence, but her parents doted on her and made it difficult for her to assert herself. She would never do anything to hurt their feelings so she went along with their wishes at most times.

Recently, Holly became acquainted with another December birthday girl at work. Noelle was also named because of her birth date close to Christmas. Holly and Noelle had much in common and developed a firm friendship. They talked about their experiences of being an only child. Neither of them ever really wanted siblings and knew others might consider them egotistical or uncaring for feeling that way. Most of the time they enjoyed having the whole attention of their parents, but sometimes realized a sibling or two would take some of the pressure off them.

They talked about doing something on their own for a change. Both of them started researching possibilities and decided maybe a trip to some place warm would be a nice change in their routines. The only time they would both be available to travel was during the Christmas season, around the time of their birthdays. This would be an adventure for both of them, but it was a predicament for Holly and Noelle.

They both wanted to go away for their birthdays and the holiday, but didn't know how to approach their parents with the idea. Holly thought they should start by dropping subtle hints so the parents could get used to the idea. Noelle thought they should be more direct and just tell the folks their plan. Either way it was not going to be an easy task.

It was decided between the two of them to take both sets of parents out to dinner and break the news to them. This would also be a good time to introduce the parents to each other and hope they would become friends since they had their daughters in common. Besides, the chance of a scene in a public place, like a restaurant, was very remote. The girls reasoned that none of their parents would want to draw attention to any disagreements.

To their amazement, when Holly and Noelle presented their plan to their parents after dinner, all four parents approved the idea of a combined holiday birthday celebration for their daughters and wondered what took the girls so long. Besides, Holly's parents told them, maybe we have plans of our own. After all, it is a magical time.

###

The Day the Masks Came Off **By N. Stewart**

At 12:01 a.m. on February 1, 2022, things changed. The pandemic restrictions were officially lifted. No more masks, no more mandates, no more restrictions. The alleged improper and excessive use of authority on the citizenry ceased to happen. Life picked up where it left off and moved forward. Enough spoke up about being caught up in the COVID cycle of psychological abuse and those individual efforts, collected together, caused rapid change in the existing situation.

The subtle abuse started with the buildup of tension by expressing serious concern over a model projection, indicating how the "novel" Corona virus would kill many, many thousands of people as it reached our shores from China. The virus landed on the West coast and then on the East coast, spreading illness and death quickly throughout the land. Americans needed to be

protected, so governmental powers, allowed by law, were temporarily granted and we were instantly isolated from family and friends for two weeks, then another two weeks and on and on. We were told constantly about all the overwhelming numbers of cases in the hospitals and that we needed to temporarily surrender our constitutionally granted First Amendment rights in an effort to contain the virus. To compensate for our cooperation, indulgent stipends would come our way for obeying the new governmental restrictions. After all, it was for our own good and the good of all of us that we complied. We waited patiently and were rewarded with hope of what was to come. A period of time without masks and a sense of freedom from imposed restrictions came into being for a short time. But then after the period of quieting, the cycle began again with the build-up of tension over the expectant new variant. The cycle of tension, the appearance of the virus, another round of payments, and again calmness followed until the third cycle began once more, building tension about an additional new variant and again restrictions were applied.

What happened to us as the psychological abuse cycles continued? Some, not all, could feel a withdrawal from life or felt an indifference creeping in, some developed low self-esteem, some had insomnia, some lost weight and some gained weight. Some felt depressed or anxious. The majority of us became fearful of going or doing anything outside the house from work, to the grocery store, to dining out, to going to the doctor, to attending worship service. Each time we ventured out was a traumatic experience and we couldn't wait to get home to sanitize. Like in an abusive relationship, we lived in constant fear, knowing that it was only a matter of time before it happened and we got sick and died.

We sought more logical and rational information but were faced only with the media's posted number of deaths and the number of new cases that had occurred each day. Any thinking contrary to government pronouncements or spew from the media was mocked, canceled or considered irrelevant. Next came an attempt to completely suppress dissenting voices. By definition in any abusive situation, those in power (albeit a person, a government body, or the media) believe they have the right to control and restrict the lives of others, using tactics of aggression, intimidation, manipulation, and humiliation.

But, no more. Enough determined citizens came forward, stood up together for their constitutional rights, and expressed their collective displeasure at the abuse, refusing to continue to cooperate with unethical, questionable, and unreasonable demands. And, that was the magical day the masks came off.

###

A Place Like This
By J. Smetana

Hey man, you talk to Hog Head?

Not Lately.

Wonder what that cat's up to?

Man I have no idea.

Just hope he's not a person of interest in the brutal murder of Little Bat.

Yeah...

Listen me and Jerry are goin' to Skokie tomorrow for Holocaust Appreciation Day, wanna come with? Skokie a MAGICAL wonderland, count me in!

###

Movie Magic **By Pauline Bastek**

It only required twelve cents for admission and fifteen cents for a box of buttered popcorn. I could smell the popcorn as soon as I crossed Chicago Avenue at Oakley Boulevard on my way to the Oakley Movie Theater. It consisted of two third-run movies, a continuing serial, Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon., a cartoon and coming attractions to guarantee our presence the following week.

After I handed over my twelve cents to the cashier who was my friend Alex's aunt, who sat there in her booth with her bottle blond hair and red lipstick and turned over my ticket to the usher, I was soon transported to a world of magic.

I could be a teen age Shirley Temple with a plaid skirt and Peter Pan collar peeking up from a sweater of my favorite color. Movies were black and white allowing me to imagine whatever color I was in the mood to wear.

Magic, pure magic.

I would be living in a home with organdy priscilla curtains at the windows of my carpeted bedroom, sitting in my Chintz upholstered chair, gazing out on the flowers in my garden and not the cemented back yard of the third floor cold-water flat with huge windows covered with lace panels that I had to help my mother dry in the attic on instruments of torture called curtain stretchers. But that's a story for another day. They looked out on the three-story building across the street.

Gone was the metal framed single bed with the wooden chair and chest as I saw Shirley stretch out on her organdy ruffled canopy four poster. I was in that small town in California where the sun always shone and my best friend was always available to share cookies and milk that our loving housekeeper made sure were available. I had a handsome father who came home in his business suit from the bank where he worked and provided me with whatever my heart desired.

For three hours or more and for only twelve cents I forgot about the father who wasn't always there and the mother who did her best but it was never really enough and friends who could not always be counted on to even meet me at the movies.

The Saturday matinee at the Oakley Movie Theater opened a world of magic to me. A world of promise of what was out there awaiting me and showed it to me in black and white so I could color it to my choosing and not the practical world of adults during those grey war years of the 1940s.

For less than the cost of a box of buttered popcorn I was pretty and well-dressed and loved. It carried me through the following week. I was Shirley or Bonita Granville or maybe Jane Withers or their alter egos. I could be Nancy Drew or Andy Hardy's girlfriend. I forgot I was a chubby pre-teen with pigtails and clothes that were deemed suitable by my mother.

Yes, it was all make believe but that's what magic is. It's making believe until dreams come true. That's what twelve cents at the Oakley Movie Theater bought in the 1940s for a young girl on the Northwest side of Chicago.

###

The Greatest American Hero: A New Generation **By Mark Moe**

Over thirty years ago, my father Ralph Hinkley was pulled from obscurity as a high school teacher in a poor district of Los Angeles. He was chosen by extraterrestrial aliens to receive a "super hero" suit imbued with several powers. The aliens had even provided a spiral instruction booklet detailing all the powers and their usage, but my father lost the instructions before he even left the desert. Despite that setback, he still managed to become a super hero fighting crimes and thwarting organized crime operations, albeit a very comical way.

At one point, he gave the suit to Holly Hathaway and she became the wearer for a while. She eventually gave it back to my father a few years later when she wanted to start a family. She also grew tired of the popularity that came with being the wearer. One time, I had asked both Holly and Dad about their experience wearing the suit. I had envisioned it being a truly, "*magical*" experience where you could feel the power surging through you as you used the various powers imbedded within it. Holly and Dad both gave somewhat similar answers. Dad said, "Kevin you never feel any power except when you use it. When you use one of the powers, it happens as if by instinct and I never felt any surge inside the suit."

Holly on the other hand said, "I guess I was a little more sensitive to the feelings of power in the suit because, when I used it, I could feel slight waves of energy pulse through me. It didn't hurt, but was like gentle waves breaking across the shoreline of a beach."

Now Dad wants to entrust me with the suit since I have graduated college. He believes it might be a good experience for me to try out the family business as he calls it. I am not so certain. The few movies taken by Special Agent Maxwell show my father with his mess of blonde, curly hair

in the suit, crashing through walls very uncoordinated, struggling to fly and stay airborne and turning invisible at inopportune times. If only he had kept the instruction manual, or if the aliens would have brought another one as a replacement, then I would have greater confidence in becoming the third wearer. It is amazing that the aliens thought he was a perfect fit for the suit. I had also never understood how the suit adjusts to different wearers and is never stretched out from wearing it continuously. Holly and Dad believed it was part of the alien technology that had some sort of smart sensors capable of measuring and storing all measurements of the wearer and even adjusted automatically if the wearer loses or gains weight. I asked about cleaning it and thought for sure it had to be handwashed, but Dad said, “It has instructions inside it that it can be washed in normal dark clothes and just hang it out to air dry. The material is so breathable that it can dry within an hour.”

After hearing this, I decided to take on the mantle of this suit. I am still concerned with how ridiculous I will look in it and how much quicker I will gain popularity in this heavily-connected media world. Now I just needed a new contact to help point me in a direction where I can make the most difference.

When I asked about why I even needed to work with a Special Agent from the FBI, Dad said, “Unfortunately, Kevin you can’t go around like your friendly, neighborhood Spiderman fighting crimes as you come across them. It is highly ineffective and you will waste many days stopping few actual crimes or missing out on the areas where you can use the suit to its maximum potential.”

“Maximum potential?! What maximum potential can there be when I do not have the instructions on how to use the suit? Am I supposed to just wing it like you and Holly did? Are you going to show me how to use all these powers or is it supposed to come to me very instinctive like you?” I asked.

“Kevin, you know of course I will show you how to use the suit. In fact, between Holly and I, we have made a new instruction manual that should cover most of the powers that we both used most often. Now Special Agent Maxwell has long since retired, but he did nominate a replacement. She was his protégé at the FBI and is still a current agent on a special assignment. She is available to act as your guide whenever you need it. Her name is Special Agent Eustice Bloom,” Dad responded as he handed me her business card.

“Well then, I guess I had better take a look at that instruction manual then. It sounds like we have work to do,” Kevin responded.

###