

An Accelerated Journey

"I have diabetes!" she proclaimed disgustedly. "I didn't eat many sweets until I came here. They're too tempting," she rebounded with chuckle.

I acknowledged her frustration with a nod and slight grin. Austa, always a quick wit, maintained her sense of humor. At ninety-one, her sky-blue eyes still flashed with vibrancy as she continues to write poetry and stories of her childhood.

"We're meeting downstairs. Would you like to join us?" I prodded, hoping to entice her to our writing group. For the past three years we have met here at the assisted living community. Once a month, Austa, the spark which ignited the group, has graced us and has granted me the privilege of assisting in publishing her works.

"Oh, it's today!" she exclaimed, fully animated. She paused and quietly said, "I don't think so. Not today."

From elation to deflation - this concerned me. "I understand," I replied. An awkward moment - I new she wanted to come. "Have you been writing?"

"Oh, yes!" she rejoiced. "Here!" Austa handed me a well scribbled notepad. Her fingers struggled with the inked sheets to find the right ones. "Take these," she demanded and tore off several pages. "They're just thoughts. I was trying to write something."

Just thoughts, I mused. Knowing Austa, being a former minister's wife, she always had something to say. More and more her faith dominated her writings and her strengthening relationship with God. I accepted her offerings. "I'll try to get these typed up for you by next meeting," I said, knowing it to be the following month. "I have several projects . . . "

"There's no rush," she replied with a grin.

I sensed an urgency to join the writing group downstairs. "I hope you feel up to joining us next time," I said and left with a departing hug. As I approached the elevator, Austa's words, "There's no rush," stuck with me. Wasn't there?

Two years earlier, a woman wished to share her Alaskan story. Her adventure began during the oil boom days of the late 1960's, reporting for oil company magazines. Copies of the technical articles she wrote were neatly tabulated in a binder. "I had a blast writing for the oil companies," she expressed, proudly. Around her apartment lay organized groupings of paintings. "I loved to do watercolors," she declared. Not only a writer, she was an accomplished artist. What a rich life. I looked forward to discovering more about this talented individual. The following meeting I was told by the group, "She died several weeks ago." I was taken aback. Even though she was in her eighties, she appeared so full of life. It seems she passed out at the dining table, was taken to the hospital but was unable to be revived. Her relatives came and retrieved her possessions a few days later. No one knew the rest of the story - The End. I sighed. There *was* a rush.

The writing group hailed me when I arrived. "Hi everyone, good to see you!" I said, sincerely. "Austa's not joining us today, maybe next time," I announced and placed my writing bag on the floor and rummaged through it to dig out my iPad. Moving aside Austa's work in the process, I added, "But, she's been writing. Does anyone have anything to share?" It wasn't necessary to ask; four of the nine gathered had works before them.

"Hey," called out Dick, "Have you heard of the game where you have pictures on dice and each player rolls the dice? What turns up, they have to create a story from each one," he imparted in his, *Let's get to the bottom-line*, style. He added, "They're prompts."

I nodded and added, getting an idea, "Here," I said and grabbed nine items from off the table. "I'll give you five minutes to write something about the item you choose."

"Do we have to write it down?" someone asked.

"I have trouble writing, too," chimed Carol. She and I were in the initial phases of her memoirs.

"You don't have to write it down," I replied and passed out the objects.

With the exception of the extraneous noises of the complex, a working silence pervaded our group.

"Okay, time's up," I said. I bit my tongue; a faux pax. I brushed away my concern and we went around the table sharing writings.

Dick started, proffering a humorous story. He wove it into his "past life" as a trapper. He confessed to writing essays and Op-Eds to local newspapers as well as articles for Trapping magazine.

Next, his wife Twila, shared a delightful story regarding a potlach in the Athabaskan village of Northway, Alaska. I suggested she submit it to a women's magazine.

David Gleason and his wife Deanne took their turn. A dynamic couple, David has written five books, both fiction and non-fiction, about Alaska. Deanne has collaborated with him.

Unfortunately, both had suffered strokes in the past several years and do not write any more.

Never the less, their storytelling capabilities are still sharp as ever. Each entertained us with their tales.

Yvonne opened with a poem but her ideas became jumbled. Being the good sport, she giggled her way to the end. "Anyway," she said, "I need help with organizing my thoughts."

"We'll schedule time together and I'll help you," I assured her.

A newcomer to the group, Greg, picked up a spoon and began to recite a very philosophical piece of poetry off the napkin he had written on. The group clapped.

"That's great!" I cheered and suggested he publish it. He gave me a sheepish look. Dick motioned to me from across the table in a writing gesture and shaking his head. I got it, Greg had physical difficulty writing. "May I see it?" requesting the napkin.

Timidly, he handed me the napkin. "I don't think you can read it," he said with a shake of his head. He was right, I could not.

"We can have someone type that for you," piped Dick.

"Carol, it's your turn," I announced and turned to face her. Carol, a long time Alaskan in her eighties and very demonstrative, launched into her storytelling.

"Well, this reminds me of when I ran my Bed and Breakfast," she began in her mid-west dialect. "My husband and I had a B&B right on the banks of the Kenai River, several miles out of Soldotna. She pulled a yellowed newspaper clipping from a pile of memorabilia before her. It was an aerial photograph of a helicopter flying over a flooded area. "See," she said, "This was my house, right there." She pointed, with two partially severed fingertips, to a large house sitting just above the high-water mark while surrounding homes lay submerged. "I insisted we build the

house up higher in case the river flooded," she said. Her eyes widened and she exclaimed, "It did!" she laughed.

This story I had heard and many others: Having being run-over by a hit-and-run driver at the age of nine, a cancer survivor at twenty-two, riding out the 1964 Earthquake, having a myriad of successful jobs and her B&B, she too was an accomplished artisan. She reeled off a plethora of experiences. However, two strokes in the past several months have jumbled her timeline.

I was last and offered a silly piece of prose. At the conclusion of our game, Dick read a piece he was working on regarding a friend. His rendition was touching - I recommended he submit it for competition.

"Let's get together and talk about it," I offered.

He agreed and we set a date. I also scheduled with Yvonne and Carol. Before we adjourned, Dick adamantly stated, "We need to get these people's stories down now, before they're gone!" I concurred.

My first meeting was with Yvonne. Looking over her writing, I saw how her thoughts wandered and repeated. How do I keep her voice and keep the storyline? I wondered. We discussed the piece and I was able to sketch her story: She began sewing Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls as a young girl in Colorado for 4-H. It gave her such pleasure. As she wrote in her poem, "They traveled to homes in Doll Land . . ."

I took snap-shots of her pages to put the poem together at home. Checking the time, I bid Yvonne good-bye and walked down the hall to see Carol. She opened the door and immediately began to relate her B&B story. One of her daughters and grand-daughter were visiting and gently

halted her recital. Placing a slip of paper in front of Carol, she said, "Remember, Mom, we listed the talking points." She gave her mom a hug and they were gone.

We sat down at her dining table, neatly piled with crafts and paperwork. "Since my strokes, the therapists have wanted me to do this," she said, picking up an adult coloring book. "You know, I used to paint. I watched Bob Ross on TV and did what he taught. Have I shown you my painting?"

"Yes," I quickly responded. Her art work was worthy of gracing any wall. "They're marvelous," I declared, sincerely. Then, interjected. "I have another meeting to attend in a little over an hour, so let's get started."

I started my recorder and requested a specific story. "Tell me how you lost the tips of two of your fingers."

"I was about twenty," she began. "I was working in a toy factory. My manager thought I was doing such a good job that I didn't need a cutting guard on my machine. So, he took it off and gave it to a new girl. Several minutes later, whack! I stood there, holding my bleeding hand. He asked me if it hurt. I said, 'No. But, how are you going to fix this?'" She laughed. "They took me to the hospital and sewed me up. I have never let this," she stated, holding up her hand, "stop me. You know, I survived cancer when I was pregnant with my first child . . ." She divulged another incredible story. "The doctors told me I was going to die. I told them, no I'm not! I'm going to bring this child into the world and raise it. I proved them all wrong," She stated, emphatically. "All the docs were dumbstruck I survived. I told them, 'You shouldn't tell people they're gonna die and to go home and wait to.' They said, 'You're right!'"

Carol pressed on, disclosing how she came to Alaska. "When I came to Alaska, my husband worked at Fort Richardson. Flying in to anchorage in 1957, I saw those snowy mountains and told my husband, 'I'm stayin' here!' And, I have," she affirmed. Carol lost her husband in 2008 and moved closer to her family, later to become a resident here. "Have I told you about my second daughter? We adopted her the day of the big quake. We had just finished the adoption and were at church, when things started shaking and swaying; it lasted a long time. I told my husband, 'I Hope this church doesn't come down, we've worked hard to adopt this baby!'" Again, her mirth flowed. Carol's outlook on life was her saving grace.

I checked the time. "Let me tell you about my B&B," she announced and recounted the years she and her husband operated their business, with great pride.

With all of this on the voice recorder, my time was up and I excused myself to move on to my next appointment. "I'll see you when we meet in October," I reminded her. "We'll schedule time to record more stories." I set off. Time. There was never enough.

Two days later, I met with Dick and Twila. As Twila and I reviewed her story, Dick, tapping on his iPad, chimed in, "Twila's got another story about Northway."

Twila handed me a typewritten page. "This one," she said with a grin, "is about my favorite Thanksgiving."

I began to read and could hear Twila's voice relive her experience: When she was ten-years-old, her parents gave to the villagers of Northway their first Thanksgiving feast. "May I incorporate this story with your other?" I asked. She agreed and I put the paper with my other notes.

Dick had emailed me a copy of his story and we'd worked on it briefly. His portrayal was one of friendship, honor and grief.

Gathering the papers, my iPad and writing pad, I was about to put them in my bag when Twila passed me a copy of a news clipping. "Talk about personal stories, look at this," she said and slid the copy across the table. Dated Monday, February 14, 2016, I read, *In Memory*. It was the obituary of Arlene "Buddy" Clay, August 2, 1912 - February 11, 2016. Her personal history was astounding. The article detailed how she became an aircraft communications and control officer for the CAA, in 1944. From Nome to Aniak, she and her husband drove dogs to get to various locations. She became the magistrate for the Alaskan Courts in 1960, traveling all over the state for over seventeen years. She gained awards for her achievements in helping establish the Alaska Court System.

Like my friends here at the assisted living community, she had been a resident too. I had missed meeting her.

"You see," reiterated Dick, "so many people here have stories to tell."

I thanked them for their hospitality and departed. That weekend, I attended a writers conference. Arriving, just as the presenter introduced himself, I scrambled for a seat.

"What's the worst thing that can happen?" Asked the presenter. A semi-rhetorical question referring to when a writer feels stuck and just needs to write. He answered with an emotional flair, "It's just a word processor!" Twitters of laughter followed by an "aha" moment.

I'd heard many stories over the three years from our group; some published, some still in progress. I realized the worst thing that can happen is their stories never get written.

I had listened to a radio host interview a physician, discuss life and longevity. He proposed, "If you look at life, imagine all your summers in a jar. It's full when we're born and very slowly they are removed. There comes a time when the jar is half-full. As we age, those summers left, are depleted at an accelerated rate." He paused to ask the audience, "How many summers do you have remaining in your jar?"

Two of my summers have escaped since I heard that question. When our writing group meets again, this summer will have been deleted from their jars too. What's the worst thing that can happen? Their stories lost.

How many summers remain in your jar? Will your stories be told?