

Of Birds and Mice

By Nancy Stephan

“What’s it been, forty years now?” This is what my cousin Steve asked me this weekend as we sat on his back deck.

“Not quite,” I said, “but almost.”

“It was September, wasn’t it?” he asked.

“Uh-huh, September fourteen.”

“You know,” he said, “It almost killed me. I was so distraught I wanted to die.”

When he said this, I was speechless. We’d never talked about it. The closest that we’d both been to it was that night in September, almost forty years ago, when I walked into his bedroom a little after midnight. But now he was talking about it, and I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to put my arm around his shoulder, but I didn’t; I just sat and listened without saying a word.

That night forty years ago when it happened, I was in bed with my mother. As she lay sleeping, I was startled by a heavy gasping sound she suddenly made. As quickly as she’d made the horrible sound she was once again quiet. I’m not sure how long I lay there before feeling like something was wrong, but I eventually climbed over her and turned on the lamp beside the bed. Her eyes were closed like she was sleeping, but her face was blue and mottled.

I picked up the phone and called my Aunt Betty. My cousin Bobby answered the phone. When I told him what was happening, he said, “You’re dreaming; go back to bed.” But I insisted that something was wrong with my mom, that she had blue lines on her face like spider webs. He hung up the phone and called Aunt Betty at work. Soon, Aunt Betty arrived at our house with the ambulance, and then we were at the hospital and the doctor was telling me how brave and smart I was to call for help. And Aunt Betty, with smudges of mascara running down her face, was telling me that my mother had gone to heaven.

And this is what I had told Steve when I walked into his room that night. Aunt Betty had told me to go lie down and not wake the boys, but Steve was already awake. And when he asked, “What are you doing here?” I said, “My mom’s in heaven.” Even though the lights were out, I saw him bolt straight up in the bed.

“Stop lying!” he shouted.

“I’m not lying; she’s in heaven.”

“Shut up!”

“But she is.”

Steve jumped down from the top bunk and ran from the room yelling for Aunt Betty. I was crushed that night because he had yelled at me and called me a liar, and he was crushed because my mother had gone to heaven, the reality of which was totally lost on me. I was eight and he was fourteen.

Now, all these years later, that night has been resurrected, and Steve is telling me that he felt like his world had ended, like his own mother had died, like he himself wanted to lie

down and die. "I remember it was September because school had just started," he said. "You know, your mom was only thirty." I nodded. People give me little details like my mother was only thirty, or, you were just a baby when it happened, because they think I was too young to remember. But I do remember.

I remember the doctor kneeling in front of me telling me how incredibly brave I was. I remember that I wasn't wearing any panties because Aunt Betty had rushed me to get dressed. I remember we were at the hospital where my mother worked as a nurse, and the vestibule was filled with her nurse friends who were weeping on each other's shoulders. Some of them I knew because they'd been to our house. When their eyes fell on me, their grief seemed to compound. I didn't understand why then, but I understand now. What I didn't understand is that "gone to heaven" meant my mother wasn't coming back.

Before Steve asked me if it's been forty years, we were talking about birdhouses. He had put up two large feeders right off the back deck and noticed that field mice had started gathering. And then he read somewhere that feeders should be at least sixty feet from places of dwelling, so he moved the feeders from the deck to the back side of the pool. And then, right in the middle of talking about birds and mice, he launched right into talking about that night of almost forty years ago. And I wonder, was it the talk of birdhouses that set him off, the fact that they offer food and refuge from the sweltering heat, or was it the idea of pushing things out a respectable distance so as not to invite pestilence near the place of dwelling?

I guess it's not important; what is important is that he opened up and I listened. And now that I've had time to mull it over, I've decided to call and thank him for not only sharing his grief, but also for giving me an entirely different perspective on the events of that night. I might also mention that when someone is saying something awful, and someone else yells at them to shut up, it's because shutting up might make what they're saying not true. I didn't understand that then, but of course I understand it now.

Nancy Stephan is the author of "The Truth About Butterflies: A Memoir," which earned the Atlanta resident a 2012 Georgia Author of the Year Award. In November 2012, she published her first collection of poetry entitled, "A Gary Girl's Guide to Good." She holds a master's degree in creative writing from Kennesaw State University and is the Writing Center supervisor at Georgia Perimeter College in Atlanta.
