

Short Stories from writing class...

- By Karen Saum

At seventy-five, what Shelley knew best about life was displacement. It had taken Albert Memmi to provide her with basic understanding of her condition. Reading *The Colonizer and the Colonized* when she was about twenty-five provided perspective but no comfort. She was a colonial child and doomed to displacement as a condition of life. While she could name the problem and knew it was not fatal, she had to accept as bitter truth that it was also beyond repair. As Memmi explained, she was neither of her native land nor the mystical "homeland" so often invoked by her parents, her aunts and uncles, her grandparents. The homeland was "The States" where everything was perfect, while the land she loved, the land where she first drew her breath, first heard sound—a neighbor's cock crow before dawn, the rustle only leaves of palm trees make, the lap of water breaking on rocks of Limon Bay—this land was nothing, its people nothing, its history counterfeit. It was just Panama. And of course the displacement was not only in Shelley's soul. To the people of Panama, Shelley was a gringa, while in the States, she was to find out her senior year in high school when her family left Panama for California, there she was a little exotic, walked slower, spoke differently, and could never quite grasp the importance of labels. A pleated plaid skirt with a Pendleton label was quite as ugly as the ones her mother bought her. Besides, there were no distinctions based on dress in Panama. There everyone shopped in the commissary, either that or through Sears and Roebuck. It was all so foreign in California. Everyone in a rush, everyone living in different houses and not according to seniority but according to how much money their daddy made. When you went to a store the clerk acted as if she were doing you a favor and if you offered to pay say half what she said something costs she looked like she might call the police. Like she might have you committed is how Mother described it.

Mother had grown up in Panama, too. Her father was an old timer, worked on the construction of the Panama Canal, had been awarded a Roosevelt medal, though somehow it had gotten lost. Mother was born in Gorgona, the old Gorgona, the one at the bottom of Gatun Lake. When Shelley was little she would sometimes cross the Isthmus by train with her grandmother. They would take a taxi from the house where grandma lived, the grey wooden house in that part of Old Cristobal called the French quarters from when De Lesseps had tried to build the canal—and failed. Shelley loved riding down Front Street even so early before it was light. Even though she couldn't see in the stores, she knew the lovely things they held, like the birthstone ring her Grandmother bought her when she was six. Of course she hadn't liked the shrunken head she once had seen in a window, from Darien the tag said, the Darien where the Jibaro still did that, beheaded people and shrunk their heads so they looked like toys only real. Best of all Shelley liked the French Bazaar. On the train, the gas lamps overhead would be lit and when they passed a certain spot on the trip, Grandma would point out the window at some dead trees and said, "Shelley, that's where your mother was born."

In Panama, Shelley went to the American school, of course, even though she lived in Colon, the Republic, unlike her dozens of cousins who all lived in the Canal Zone and came to school in a big yellow bus. The first day of school, when Shelley was five, she rode to school in a jitney bus along with other children who lived in the Republic and not the Zone. It was so exciting going by herself to school and once there she saw children playing her favorite game, dodge ball. She ran to join but a couple of the bigger boys pushed her and called her a spic, "Spics can't play with us," they said and they paid no

attention when she told them she wasn't one not a spic, but an American like them. After that Mother brought her to school each day and took her home again.

In high school, Shelley was on all the intramural sports and the marching band and the orchestra. Cristobal High School was small and there was only one other American High School, Balboa, on the "other side." That was a big joke. Everything was "on the other side." There were two sides, of course, to the Isthmus of Panama, the Pacific side of the Canal and the Atlantic side where Shelley lived. And it seemed no matter what you wanted to do, it was always on the other side: Taboga Island was on the other side; the Tivoli, the other side; Coronado Beach and el Valle. Whatever you wanted to do, it was on the other side. Of course, Shelley knew that the kids from Balboa had the same complaint: Bilgray's, it's on the other side; Fort Sherman, it's on the other side. The Washington Hotel. The Washington Hotel among other things is where proms were held. Because you couldn't drive in Panama until you were eighteen, parents took everyone to dances and brought them home again afterwards. That was a little different, too, in California. Shelley mentioned the custom of parents driving kids to the prom only once at her new high school, Tamalpais, across the Bay from San Francisco. Someone listening said, "Parents took you to dances?" and sniggered. Also, there were no intramural sports at Tam. Well, not for girls anyway.

So, Shelley was never really at home anywhere, just like Memmi had said. For some reason, though, when she first visited Maine—she was twenty-two then and already had her first child—she felt at home.

"Maine?" her cousins all said. They had mostly come to the States, too, by then but they all lived in Florida or California, Texas or Arizona. "Why on earth Maine?"

Shelley had given it some thought, but didn't understand any better than her cousins until one day she watched the video of Anne of Green Gables and in a flash she understood. Right about the time when she was beginning to learn that her country was The States, not Panama, she had started to read "Anne of Green Gables", and as she tried to imagine the States and to love it as she ought, her fantasies were fed by these stories. Prince Edward Island had become for Shelley the States. And of course the people of Prince Edward Island were of the same stock as those of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Maine. Together they shared a culture combining personal generosity with an austere respect of privacy. The land, too, was the same, Maine of a piece with the Atlantic Provinces. It was thus that Shelley, when she arrived on that camping trip at age twenty-two, experienced for the first time in her life the sensation of having come home. Never mind if natives sensed her difference. Shelley knew. Maine was home.

Memories

- By Twila Greene

I suppose it's not unusual to mark the passage of time to different events that occur in one's life. As examples: what was happening when President Kennedy was shot? Where were you when Pat Boone's April Love was playing in the theatre? What were you doing when you learned that Grandpa had terminal cancer? What year did you move from here to there? When did you travel to Abu Dhabi? What about the World Trade Center explosions?

Everyone carries memories: visual pictures that flash across the eons of time taking you back over the years; back to another time and another place. Smells play a key role in my transportation system. The other day I passed by Friars Bakery in Bangor and all at once I found myself in Grandmother's kitchen in Drum Head. Not only was I six hundred miles away, but I was no longer a dottering old woman but, behold, I was a long legged eleven year old in bare feet and shorts and skirt.

"Help me get this bread to the table," Gram asked. She sat in her rocking chair in front of the large Kemac wood stove. Huge golden loaves waited on the oven door. More bread had risen and was ready to take its place in the big oven. The aroma that wafted from the loaves was intoxicating. I inhaled deeply and put on the oven mitts. My grandmother, in her younger days had cooked in the lumber woods for the men.

She was a gargantuan woman with black hair, a smooth, flawless face and a ready smile. She rarely left her kitchen rocker now. She did all of her duties from that one spot in front of the stove. Someone would bring her vegetables to peel, fish to clean and scale, flour and sugar to mix for her delicious concoctions. She even washed the dishes from a large dishpan on the wooden table by her chair. I often would do her bidding, carrying her water from the tank on the stove. It had to be filled twice daily from the well. Her cookie jars never emptied. They were always ready for a visiting neighbor, a hungry grandchild or a weary traveler that Grandfather would meet in the neighborhood and invite home. Often these strangers would stay with us for days and become fast and true friends. Ours was always a house of hospitality and activity.

There was no indoor plumbing. A deep and cold well was our delectable water supply. Two galvanized buckets set on the pantry shelf. A two holer outhouse graced the field out back. One time my uncle came home for a couple of weeks from the island where he kept the lighthouse. I think that was the summer that my cousin Cheryl was born. He decided that he would dig a new toilet and construction began. I worked alongside him mainly for the pleasure of his company. His son Paul and I were good friends and close to the same age. Paul lived the school year in my Grandparents home while his parents were on the island. We both attended the one-room school house in the village. That year it held thirty six children from kindergarten through ninth grade.

Back to the toilet: when the hole was dug construction started on the building. Talk about elaborate! It had a built in magazine rack to house the Sears catalogues (which were used for reading and for toilet paper); a chart with the names of likely attenders and to top it all off: it was a three holer, no less. The privy was a source of pride! We boasted the only three-holer in the community.

My least favorite chore was emptying the enamel slop pails. Gram was house bound and unable to go to the outhouse. Few made the journey at night. Wild storms and high gales would be an excuse for anyone to avoid the trek outside. The kitchen stove was the only heat source, so on winter mornings the contents would frequently be frozen. Hot water would need to be hauled from the tank on the wood stove and poured into the chamber jugs to get them melted enough to empty. I haven't seen it for years, but they would then require a disinfectant of creolyn to render then reusable again. I can still see and smell the mixture. It was thick and black like molasses and had a distinct tarry smell. Those were the days.

Was it only because I was young and unaware of the tragedies that occurred around me that I recollect it as a time of tranquility and joy? After all, the house was full and running over. My Uncle Willis had wanted to come home from the city to die and his wife and my mom took turns caring for him. He suffered a lot until his death and fought a brave battle for seven months. He was only forty-one years old.

Aunt Val knit me a beautiful Mary Maxim sweater complete with zipper and pockets. It was orange and black. The cold was severe that fall. The house was only a short distance from the ocean and that was the fall of hurricanes. We lived on a jut above the fish plant and were surrounded on three sides by the ocean. Each night bricks and catalogues were heated in the oven to warm icy beds. That was also the year that Lucy Arthur rose from the dead.