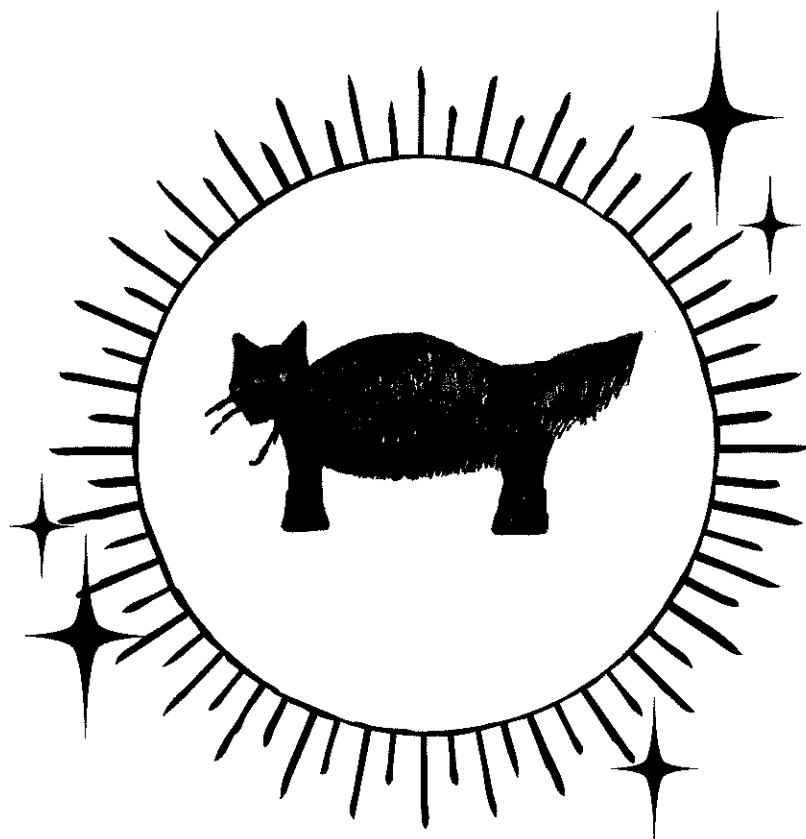


# The Cover



WCWP SUMMER  
INSTITUTE

2024







Our Dear Coven,

It has been a distinct pleasure to gather each day around our table and learn together. We are so pleased that this first all female institute gave us a lot of laughs and a safe space to let our voices be heard. While we got off to a bit of a rocky start with illness, interviews, and the opportunity to be on a reality show - we came together and formed a group that is strong, supportive, and magical. Truly magical, not just magic adjacent. As you head into a new year of teaching (some with fully developed frontal lobes, some nearly there), take all the tricks and spells you learned this summer with you. Use the stickers, rage journal if you need to, and impart all of your newly acquired wisdom with your students. If your year starts to squiggle off into a different direction, the coven is always here to help you find your way.

Peace Out, Witches!  
Pauline and Jen



## Table of Contents:

### Lauren Durante

Picture Perfect Grandma	3
The Witches: Stories of the Misunderstood	10

### Jen Greene

Reverso Poem	11
Lexapro Island	12

### Justine Imburgio

How To Please Others: A Comprehensive Guide to Selling Yourself	13
Wine, A Concrete Poem	20

### Elyse McDevitt

Pomegranate Seeds	21
VOICE	24

### Nina Photiades

Adventures & Misadventures	25
Rage	29

### Kaitlyn Rodgers

Lessons from St. Therese of the Big Flower	30
The Witches' Trial	38
Skinny Jeans	39

### Pauline Schmidt

Ode to My Son	40
Purple, Everywhere	42
The Future is Female	43

### Bonnie Stritzinger

At the Kitchen Table: Sharing My Truth	44
--	----

Author Bios & Witchy Pics	47
---------------------------	----



## Picture Perfect Grandma

By Lauren Durante

### June 2018

My grandmother squeezed my hand as she pulled me in for a hug. My graduation cap was on display next to an array of pictures, serving as a reel of all the moments over the course of my life. Some are embarrassing, and some are personal favorites. Like the one of my grandma carefully crafting the perfect bun for one of my first dance recitals, holding the giant aerosol hairspray bottle that was almost as big as me, and pinching several bobby pins between pressed lips for when she was ready to strategically place them in my hair. A picture of me with both my grandparents at my confirmation. Pictures of me, sweaty and exhausted after playing in basketball tournaments, squished between my proud grandparents who were excited to see me on the court, and similarly posed pictures, matched with a bouquet of flowers they brought me after every dance or musical performance. All my life, my grandma and grandpa were my cheerleaders, and that day, after my college graduation was no different. I was going off to college in two months to study education, and my grandparents couldn't stop smiling and telling everyone.

### November 2018

"WHAT HAPPENED?! WHAT HAPPENED?! WHAT HAPPENED?!"

Much softer in the background, I heard my mom break down into tears immediately. My stomach dropped.

"Nan has cancer?" my sister whispered, repeating my mother's words back through the phone dripping with shock. *No this can't be true. One of my favorite people in the world. My*



*go-to person at family parties. Our family storyteller. The proudest mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Our family rock. She's invincible. She cannot have cancer.*

"...what," I whispered back through the phone. My roommate's eyes bugged out of her head, since an unsuspecting me left the call on speakerphone.

My mom, once again, panicked. She didn't know I was on the phone. Apologizing profusely, she sobbed through the phone about how she never wanted me to hear about it this way: over the phone, hundreds of miles away from everyone, in my dorm room.

"It's fine, I'm going to go."

I swiftly hung up, looked at my roommate feeling like my world just came crashing down. Not knowing what to do, I collapsed into my bed, pushing off whatever lingering assignments I had for the next day.

"I'm taking a nap." *Since nobody can hurt me or my Nan as long as I'm asleep.*

When I awoke, my roommate left me some candy, our favorite iced tea, and a note saying if I wanted to talk she was there, and if I needed space I had it, no questions asked. I knew I slowly had to come to accept this horrific truth. But for now, I wanted to pretend that this wasn't my reality.

## **Spring 2019**

My weekly phone calls to Nan and Pop shifted around her doctor's appointments. Every Wednesday, I would call to wish her luck before she left for chemotherapy, and every phone call she would pick up, like the chippy and proud grandmother she was.

"Hi Nan, how're you feeling? I wanted to wish you luck today at chemo?"

"OH thanks, Doll. How's my little teacher?"

I could hear her smile through the phone. Her pride beaming with every word, that I would one day be a teacher. That her granddaughter was one of the first in the family to go to college. I needed to make her proud and do this. So I did everything in my power to achieve high grades and get my degree in time for Nan. *But I don't think there's enough time for her to be there to see it happen.*

"Hi Doll," my grandmother's nickname for every grandchild. A nickname she landed on because when we were all babies, she said we reminded her of perfect little dolls. Gathered in my grandparents small kitchen in Bergen County, New Jersey, we found the entire family coming together more and more as we felt our internal clocks ticking away with time for our Nanny. Cousins, aunts, uncles, everyone wanted to get as much time with Nanny as we could. This was a simple task for the family that lived in New Jersey on the same block as her *Everybody Loves Raymond* style, but much harder for me, a first year college student, two-hundred miles away with no car, or my family living two hours away in the suburbs of Scranton.

## **Winter 2019**

We could tell it would be her last Christmas: her favorite holiday. We had to get her the perfect gift. This had to be her perfect Christmas.

Our entire family racked our brains for what Nanny and Papa might like for a Christmas gift. Aside from the usual holiday anxiety over finding the right gift for everyone, this year felt different. We wanted our gift to be absolutely perfect for this last Christmas.

My sister suddenly remembered a conversation my grandmother had with her when she lived with my grandparents briefly. Nan talked about how she would love to hang up the



grandkids portrait from fifteen years ago so she could see all her grandchildren in one photo, but she couldn't since my cousin's ex-husband was in the portrait. When my sister mentioned getting the grandkids and great-grandkids into a big canvas portrait, the entire family knew that was the perfect gift. Not only would it give Nanny her portrait she so badly wanted, but it would also have a spot for Nanny to have a portrait of her newest-additions to her family, the great-grandchildren.

Yet again, from the confines of my dorm room, I was thrown into a massive group chat with all of my cousins. We had to coordinate a date where everyone was available with ample time for the portrait to be printed and ready by Christmas. Once a day was settled, I drove the two hours to New Jersey, coordinated outfit in tow, and made sure everything was picture perfect for Nan.

### **Christmas Eve 2019**

The largest Christmas gathering in fifteen years. Nanny's dreams of having everyone together were coming true. When she opened the portrait, she immediately burst into tears, her excitement beaming through her smile. *She loved it. We did it. We found Nan's gift.*

As we left the living room where the portrait was opened, my sister and I stayed behind to help clean up the wrapping paper and help our Nan walk back into the kitchen for dessert. Walking back to the kitchen, she turned to my sister and I and whispered with a massive smile on her face and tears in her eyes "This is the best Christmas ever."

### **March 8, 2020**





It's Sunday and Nanny's 87th birthday is two days away. The entire family got together at my cousin's house to throw her a birthday party. We all gathered around her massive cake, surrounded with all the Italian appetizers, pasta dishes, and pastries we could muster to celebrate her, what appeared to be, last birthday. Looking beautiful as always, but with her new wig that "couldn't look like the old people's hair," my Nan gathered around her cake as we all pushed in to get as many photos of her as possible. It felt as though the pictures captured her in that moment and she would stay frozen and safe. She would just stay here forever and it would be okay.

### **March 10, 2020**

Tick tock. The clock seems to be speeding forward and we can't get enough time in with Nan. As if my nightmare couldn't get worse, as I'm home for spring break and visiting Nanny, trying to knock out as many upcoming assignments as possible, an email comes through from the university. There is a global pandemic starting. Suddenly we are quarantining, my classes are pushed online, I'm trying to navigate my assignments, find all my Zoom links for class, and control my rollercoaster of anxious thoughts, and I can't go see my Nan. I don't even know when I can get my things from my dorm room.

Every night, we called the house and she would pick up and answer "How are my favorite people?" to our quarantine crew in Pennsylvania. Miles away, a voice on the phone, when we all wanted to squeeze her with a hug, hear her stories, and spend every moment we could in her presence. Every day we called, and every day, she mentioned how she was admiring her portrait, hung proudly on the mantel as the focal point of the room for all to see.



## **June 2020**

I spent every summer as a camp counselor at a local camp. For six years, I spent my days playing capture the flag, dodgeball, having water balloon fights, and running around the playground with all my campers. It was the seven weeks in the year I looked forward to the most until 2020. I spent my days working on virtual camp activities for campers who couldn't come in person, keeping socially distant so that I could visit Nan as our days dwindled. As she got worse, it became a daily trip.

Wake up. Go to camp. Sanitize. Keep as far away from everyone as possible. Sanitize. Double mask. Sanitize. Film activities for virtual campers. Sanitize. Go home. Change. Drive two hours to New Jersey. Spend every moment possible with Nan. Leave by ten. Drive two hours home back to Pennsylvania. Pray for another day. Repeat.

## **July 7, 2020**

I got a call from my dad while at work. He said I had to leave immediately. We were leaving for New Jersey to see Nan. It wasn't looking good.

"Are we going to make it in time," I asked.

"I don't know."

My heart raced. Speed limits didn't matter. I don't need to pack. We need to get to Nan.

No longer able to speak or move, stuck in her house, still during the peak of Covid, we found our Nan. The entire family surrounded her for days. Barely responsive, we held her hand and everyone shared stories they remembered over the years with her.

## **July 10, 2020**



I woke up early and went straight to Nanny. After a few minutes, I noticed her breathing wasn't the way it had been lately.

"Mom? Dad?"

My mom immediately called for everyone to come in, knowing our last moments were here. We all gathered around her bed, teary-eyed, lost and unsure of a world without her. As we could feel her breathing getting further apart, everyone around her bedside whispered "I love you, Nanny."

The next few days went by in a blur of emotions. I jumped between checking in on my grandpa, who lost his soul-mate of seventy years, having anxiety attacks, crying, and being downright numb to the world around me. Everything was wrong. Nothing was okay. My favorite supporter is gone.

### **July 15, 2020**

At the funeral home, before our route to the cemetery, my dad went over to the casket and said we missed a valuable detail in planning. From his pocket, he slipped out a printed copy of the portrait and placed it in with her. "She loved this picture so much. She looked at it every day and would smile. She needs a copy wherever she goes."

## The Witches: Stories of the Misunderstood

By Lauren Durante

Dear Reader,

It's curious to find you here, but welcome to our coven. We are the voices misunderstood. We are the assigned villains in the known narrative of the story. Few of us ever get a glimpse at redemption, but even so, our reputations have been tarnished for so long that we are forever immortalized as the wicked presence in the story. We are the witches.

Many people don't realize that we too have emotions and feelings, and that our actions are usually driven by reason. Sure, we may occasionally overreact, but who doesn't from time to time. Unfortunately for us, people were there and chose to hold on to those moments, highlighting the action, rather than the story behind it. How did we get to our breaking points, and were we really evil in what we were doing?

For us, we never got to tell our own story. We are powerful women, and that scares a lot of people. We are willing to fight for what we believe in, speak up, and here and there, practice a little magic. There's nothing immoral about being a strong woman, at least we don't think so. For so many years, we have been outcasts, hunted down, tortured, vilified. They call us witches, and shy away like we are going to spellbind them if we make eye contact. We are feminists (or feminwitches.) We are tired of being the scapegoats and never being heard, only feared. Our side of the story is never told and we wish to use our voices to finally share our side of the story. The tales of the misunderstood.

So welcome to the witchy sisterhood of the misunderstood. Pull up a cauldron, share some spells or stories, or just vent. Our spell book club is held every full moon, and we are always looking for great suggestions. Embrace your inner feminwitch. We are here for you and we believe that you are truly good-natured, you are simply misunderstood.

Sincerely,

The Coven of the Misunderstood

The Coven Reverso Poem  
By Jen Greene

Gathered round a table  
We are the coven  
Teachers teaching teachers  
Hear the laughter and learning  
Playful yet studious  
We meet  
To share ideas and stickers  
Creating a community of writers  
A supportive group  
Grand reactions of awe and positivity  
Delighting in joy  
Though we are mostly direct  
At times we squiggle adjacent  
This group of magical women convenes  
At the West Chester Writing Project

At the West Chester Writing Project  
This group of magical women convenes  
At times we squiggle adjacent  
Though we are mostly direct  
Delighting in joy  
Grand reactions of awe and positivity  
A supportive group  
Creating a community of writers  
To share ideas and stickers  
We meet  
Playful yet studious  
Hear the laughter and learning  
Teachers teaching teachers  
We are the coven  
Gathered round a table

Reimagined Genres  
By Jen Greene



# ENJOY LEXAPRO ISLAND

**AMENITIES INCLUDE:**  
**REGULATED LEVELS OF SEROTONIN**  
**LIMITED CRYING JAGS**  
**LESSONED INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS**

**PRICING AS LOW AS 5MG**

## How To Please Others: A Comprehensive Guide to Selling Yourself

By: Justine Imburgio

### Step 1: Be You

First, you'll need to figure out who you are. Now, whatever image you have in your head, of the things that bring you genuine joy and passion, let's take that and contort it! Ask yourself!

- Who is the you that gets the most laughs in meetings?
- What about the image that gets the most compliments from men?
- Whose opinions are the most agreeable?
- Who's always smiling?
- Ready to help?

Dig her out and present her to the world! When in doubt, a warm, vaguely friendly works just fine!

**Tip:** When considering your self-image, don't dwell too much on past experiences with others, especially on perceived social failings. Often, it'll cause a disdain for yourself to bloom. Once created, this will follow you for a seemingly unending amount of time, like a crown of thorns, and the dark stain of blood that it leaves behind.

## **Step 2: Become a Mirror**

Remember, you want to twist yourself into a reflection of what people are into so it's best not to rouse any differing opinions or values. Make yourself into a chameleon or better yet, a single fish in a school of thousands, swimming with whatever's current.

Ask yourself: What do people like? Seem daunting? Don't worry. You can like it too! Don't think about the sand of your identity slipping through your fingers.

One great way to accomplish this is to go on Twitter and observe the political views that get the most likes. These opinions are great to spit out when you're at a dinner or other social event. Don't get too controversial though. You don't want to scare away anyone leaning any way besides moderate. I like to adopt pithy statements that are hard to disagree with like "We are all equal!" or "Tampons should be free!"

**Example:** When scouting out a group of potential friends, you may notice that one has a particular affinity for emo music. Do not reveal that you have long abandoned your emo phase in seventh grade. Be steadfast and do your homework. Listen to the entire works of Title Flight and Turnover in the span of one evening and inconspicuously



drop tidbits into conversation. (“Wow did you hear [insert album that came out within the last year]? Super cool right?”).

If you hide your desperation well enough, you’ll get some credit for your work, and you may even get an invitation to hang out with them. After two years of keeping this up, the guy I was particularly entranced with in high school actually asked me to come with him to a Mom Jeans concert! I even got to stand behind him so I could stare at his neck the entire time! Don’t forget to give a little smile or dance every time he looks over, so you don’t blow your cover.

### **Step 3: Learn Some Skills**

Make yourself useful! Be there when their car breaks down. Give them a ride. Let them use your charger. Make them dinner and insist on doing the dishes too. Help them with their homework. Do their homework! Don’t think about whether they want you there or even need you. The point is, that you are there, and that’s better than sitting alone in your dorm.

**Example:** If a potential friend is posting on social media that they are upset, always message them and offer yourself as a shoulder to cry on. If you are steadfast enough and good enough at listening, they may even begin to associate you with the feeling of comfort!

**Remember!** Don't chime in when you have an experience that relates to what they're going through. It's not about you.

#### **Step 4: Keep Apologizing**

This step is fairly easy, as you most likely already feel like a walking stain on the Earth. Plus, you would never want to give the impression that you think you're better than everyone, would you? The trick here is to make apologizing akin to a knee jerk reaction to most situations, or to think about it as a form of punctuation.

**Example:** Late to class? Apologize. Not that late to class? Still apologize. Enter a room where people are talking, and they seem to stop and look at you? Apologize. Speaking up in class? Say "sorry, I just wanted to..." first. Eating? Apologize. Breathing? Apologize. Taking up space? You know what to do.

**Tip:** When someone inevitably comments that you're "always apologizing" try to think of a response that sounds smarter than, "yeah sorry".

#### **Step 5: Take it in**

Bathe in the rush of endorphins when you're invited, when you're smiled at, laughed with. Go to the party when you're tired, because who knows when the next one will be?

Revel in becoming a human slot machine, releasing dopamine at every positive glance, every compliment, every shred of attention.

**Example:** You may notice that the people you have been spending time with may not appreciate you or even like you. You may notice little quips here and there, jokes that seem a little too pointed, or invitations “lost” in group chats that don’t include you. They may not be particularly funny or have the same interests as you. They may not even be nice! Push these concerns out of your mind! Remember that this is what you wanted. Friends. Community. Don’t be ungrateful. Take it in.

### **Step 6: Don’t Get Crushed**

Never expect reciprocation! It’s easy to cry when the person you’ve invited over 100 times goes to the frat without you. Let it out when you’re alone, but don’t let them see any emotion! They may think you’re needy or clingy. When you see them in the dining hall the next day, adopt an air of interest that borders on blase as you ask about their weekend plans. Make it seem like you are only asking to be polite, and not because you are hungry for a glimpse into their world. Don’t ask for too many details. If prompted, tell them you were doing something else, equally as exciting.

**Example:** Your therapist may tell you that setting boundaries is a great way to get what you want out of a friendship and to ensure everything is mutual. Don’t fall for it! She’s not telling you that little expulsions like this may cause them to think of you as a

burden and dispose of you altogether. Or worse, they may not respect your boundaries, crossing lines you've drawn over and over again, while you just keep forgiving them or pretending that it didn't happen.

### **Step 7: Repeat For All Other Relationships**

If you have followed all steps correctly, you should find yourself with a satisfying number of companions and at least 50% less Friday Nights lying alone in your room. When faced with other relationships, such as professional or romantic ones, repeat steps 1-6.

**Example:** Romantic relationships can be tricky, especially when you find yourself in a one-sided situation with a man much older than you. Luckily, all guidelines above can be applied here! Arguments can be resolved quickly by just apologizing and moving on. Besides for his conjectures, you can keep the ride of your relationship mostly smooth by never bringing up any issues you have with him, his drinking, or his ill-mannered friends. If he can bottle up all his emotions, so can you.

### **Step 8: Don't Let the Pendulum Swing the Other Way**

After a few years of following this program, you may be discouraged to find yourself with several memories of wrongs made against you that were never made right. You may hold a burgeoning desire to lash out as a result that seethes and boils under your

skin like an ugly rash. You may become particularly activated when someone cuts you in line or underestimates you at your job. "Do they think I'm some kind of weak person," you may ask yourself. "Do they think I'm some spineless idiot who won't defend themselves, because I will," you may also say.

It's best to find some ways to manage this anger. Let them merge into your lane. Nod when your boss yells at you. Even smile. Too often than not, this thought process will eventually lead to what others will later call a "temper tantrum" and few will defend you.

**Example:** When going to a crowded bar for a celebration for your friend's promotion, do not ruin it by causing a scene when someone steps on your foot. Try your best to stifle the feeling of inadequacy and frustration that you've been feeling in your job with at least seven margaritas. When a drunk person bumps into you, do not scream at him so loudly that your circle of dancing friends all become quiet and one of them has to pull you away from him by the arm. You will not be remembered as the hero of that situation, and you will in fact, feel worse.

Wine  
A Concrete Poem

Wine like rain  
Overflows when I  
Pour with my eyes  
And not my brain.  
Wine for my pain  
Either red or white,  
It all feels alright.  
When my thoughts  
go down the drain  
Gulp  
Sip  
Chug  
Gulp  
Sip  
Chug  
Feel so inebriated,  
When all I ever needed  
Was you and a hug.

## Pomegranate Seeds

By Elyse McDevitt

My mom was standing in the kitchen with her hands in a bowl of water, submerging half a pomegranate. She had read about this method of freeing the seeds from the fleshy membrane. The water would keep the ruby arils from staining her hands red, she said. We giggled as some of the seeds slipped through her fingers and onto the counter— clearly, this method was not going entirely to plan. But I sat at the kitchen table listening and watching intently as she walked me through the steps. It was 2014; I had just gotten home for the summer after my freshman year of college, and she had just returned home from the hospital where she was diagnosed with heart failure.

My mom had been sick for eighteen months at that point. She was continuously misdiagnosed with a digestion issue, so the real problem in her heart brought on by sarcoidosis, an autoimmune disease, only got worse over time. She was on the verge of dying when she finally made it to the emergency room. Although her ailment was discovered, her doctors informed her that the damage to her heart was so severe that a heart transplant would be imminent within the coming years.

I remember feeling a desperate need to be close to her that summer. There was some relief knowing there was a plan in place to monitor her health and keep her living with her natural heart for as long as possible before such a serious surgery; however, the shadow countdown to a heart transplant was terrifying. I was afraid I'd lose her, and as I sat in the kitchen watching the pomegranate seeds float to the top of the water's surface, I couldn't escape the feeling that my mom teaching me how to peel a pomegranate was the most important thing in the world.

The next six years consisted of good days and bad days for my mom. Anxiety over her declining health and inevitable heart transplant was still part of our lives, but we worked to focus on the positive experiences we shared together until January 27, 2020 when she was finally admitted to Jefferson Hospital of Philadelphia to await her new

heart. We were unsure how long she'd be living there waiting for the right match— it could vary from days to months— but we knew this day was coming, and we were ready. What we weren't ready for was the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the passing weeks of my mom's stay, family, friends, and medical staff tried to remain optimistic that everything would still move accordingly with her transplant despite rising case numbers around the world. But when she lost a match due to the donor's potential exposure to the virus, I felt fear's grip begin to tighten around us. When the United States shut down on March 13th, my mom was no longer allowed to receive any visitors. And when she finally got the green light for a transplant on March 26th, not even her immediate family was allowed to be with her before she entered the operating room.

Wishing my mom luck with her surgery and saying goodbye to her for what could be the last time through FaceTime was a surreal nightmare. Seeing her face on an iPhone felt like another step closer to losing her, as if she was already slipping away and leaving me with a digitized memory of her. But even then I knew my mom was never alone. The staff at Jefferson, including the doctors, nurses, and housekeeping crews, kept her spirits high during her entire two-month stay, especially when it was time for her transplant. Knowing she had them when we couldn't be with her helped alleviate some of the heartache and anxiety my family and I felt when we couldn't be. They became like a surrogate family for her. When my mom celebrated her 59th birthday during her stay, the staff surprised her with a cake while they sang to her. When she was being wheeled down to the operating room, Miss Kim, a vivacious crew member who always wore matching hand-made scrubs with colorful patterns, sang "Amazing Grace" when accompanying my mom in the elevator.

My mom's surgery was successful, and she was up walking around just two days later. We later found out that this was the last transplant performed at Jefferson Hospital for the next two months because of COVID-19. The state of my mom's heart wouldn't have carried her through that much longer. But where there is a successful transplant story, there is a story of loss. My mom's donor, Jake, was only 26 when he died. He left behind so many people who loved him. Eventually, my mom got in touch with his parents



through the Gift of Life Foundation, and my family got to meet them for the first time in October of 2022. After hours of talking and drinking and eating and laughing and crying, the day ended with Jake's parents using a stethoscope to listen to his heart beating strongly in my mom's chest.

My family and I live every day remembering Jake; we know his birthday, we toast him on holidays along with other loved ones who have passed, and we talk about him freely when we're together. We try to pay homage to him as best we can and honor his life and the four lives he saved with his organ donations.

As I write this, it has been over four years since my mom's transplant. Every day she's living is another example of how miracles consist of groups of people— some who work together like the Jefferson staff, and others who exist in a tangential storyline until they become the main characters like Jake and his family. I'm lucky I still have my mom in my life as a friend and a guide. I continue to learn from her pearls of wisdom every day, though the irony of first clinging to her teaching me how to peel a pomegranate is that she's discouraged from eating them now on her immunosuppressant medication for her heart. But I still remember first watching her work to free the ruby seeds from their casing and the feeling of the harsh drag of receding time. Although I can sometimes still feel time's elapsing presence, I'm grateful for the surge of added years with my mom as I carry her experience with me.

## VOICE

By Elyse McDevitt

My voice was a slow bloom that sprung  
from the packed litterfall of wilted,  
fumbled words and  
meaning that never took root.  
But I discovered I don't need a final note  
to start singing.  
For curiosity, wonderment, exploration,  
I can join the conversation  
strong as one voice,  
stronger adding harmony to a chorus.

## Adventures & Misadventures

By Nina Photiades

My trip back to the U.S. from Spain was a journey in and of itself. After spending time in Asturias amid the pandemic, my departure was bittersweet. Travel restrictions made reaping the benefits of being in Europe very difficult, adding layers of disappointment to an already somber time. The local authorities were particularly stringent, requiring meticulous documentation for any excursion beyond our municipal borders. Just before my visa expired, I seized a fleeting opportunity to venture south.

The final week of living my Lizzie McGuire dream began with a dreadful descent from a train upon arrival in Sevilla. Two fifty pound suitcases stuffed to the brim sent my body flying and my knee colliding sharply with the unforgiving platform. My dear friend Marco had a front row seat to this stumble, his concern parted the sea of Spaniards offering sorrows with a familiar, “Oh my god, are you okay?” Other than the crimson river flowing from my kneecap, everything was intact . . . for now. I gathered my things and shook it off. This wasn’t going to ruin my adventure. Little did I know that my body would meet the pavement again just a few hours later.

Marco and I celebrated our arrival to the south with Clara de Limón, a very refreshing lemon beer that does not taste like beer at all. This shortly devolved into debauchery when we met a middle aged couple who wanted to show us how Spaniards defined a ‘night out.’ Six hours later, dizzy, covered in sangría, and bandaged three times over, I stumbled through the streets, following Marco. At around 3 am, we reached the stairs to our hostel. The beds beckoned, and thanks to pandemic conditions, we had the entire hostel to ourselves—I could choose any bed I wanted. My mind moved faster than my body, resulting in a complete and total faceplant on the

first step. Luckily or unluckily, I was so drunk I felt nothing. I rolled over in laughter as I once again heard my friend's voice, "Oh my god, are you okay?"

The next morning, the day before my flight home, I woke up with a giant knot on my forehead and muscle aches. Again, I shook it off. I had one final day and needed to redeem myself. Marco and I packed up our things in the 105-degree heat and he, ever responsible, did a final sweep for forgotten items as I loaded the elevator. With my passport in hand, confident that I had all of my things, I squished into the elevator with suitcases. I yelled to Marco that I would meet him downstairs. The doors shut and I quickly pressed the ground floor button. Suddenly, a jolt plunged me into darkness and alarms blared loudly. Instant regret. Over the alarms I, once again, heard Marco yell, "Oh my god, are you okay?" I was sweating through my clothes and trying my best to communicate with the Spanish fire department over an intercom system. The combination of heat and panic made translating very difficult, but I managed something along the lines of: "I am in the elevator. I am hot. Please help." After being lifted out of the elevator by a group of 4 hunky Spanish men, my hangover hit me full force and the knot on my forehead started pulsing in sync with the cut on my knee. I desperately pleaded for silence and a single gust of wind to cool me off. With glasses of room temperature water in hand and tapas on the table, Marco joked that he should call his mom to perform a traditional Mexican cleanse of negative energy. "All we need is an egg," he shrugged.

I should have headed this joke, because the morning of the 18th, my departure began with food poisoning in the airport. Snatching the last luggage cart available, I secured my bags to the best of my ability while I sped towards the bathroom. I locked the door and threw my body on the ground, encountering seafood paella from the previous night. Two grueling hours later, I wiped my mouth and popped a piece of gum before refastening my mask.

The only thing standing in the way of me and the end of the treacherous journey was an 8 hour flight. *What could possiblyyyyyy go wrong?* I reluctantly boarded the plane, making my way to entirely empty rows. I found my seat, buckled in extra tight, and listened more intently than usual as the flight attendants recited the safety briefing. Stomach still churning, I took a deep breath and opened my Kindle. Reading always helped me calm down, plus I had plenty of titles stored in my digital library. After scrolling through the icons, I chose the one that looked the least daunting. It had a happy cover and the description seemed simple; it was the perfect thing to get my mind off of my latest experiences. I tap the icon and begin reading the first line. “*On June 18, I was the lone survivor of a plane crash.*” “Are you fucking kidding me?” I shrieked as I slammed the cover of my Kindle and launched the reader across the plane.

As I watched the flight attendants' eyes widen behind their masks, it was a stark reminder of being in a public place. I needed to regain my composure. Although I'm not religious, the events of the day led me to retrieve the rosary my mom insisted I take with me. Reciting prayers I hadn't uttered since school, I found solace in the familiar words. I sipped on countless cups of hot tea and rocked back and forth like a crazy person, counting down the minutes until I would be home.

Eight hours later, the plane touched down in New York. My phone lit up with messages from friends and family, wishing me a safe journey and welcoming me home. I stood up quickly, gathered my belongings, and hurried through the terminal. The wait for my luggage was torture and my mind raced through 8 million worst case scenarios. Finally spotting the blue bandana tied to my suitcase handle, I grabbed both bags without hesitation and let out the breath I had been holding. I sprinted out of the terminal, seeing my fiancé in the distance. I ran so fast into his



arms, tears of relief flooding down my face. I heard him sweetly ask the familiar question, “Oh my god, are you okay?” and this time I could confidently answer, “yes.”

## Rage

by Nina Photiades

Rage is an untamable force,

A quiet storm, lying in wait beneath the surface.

She is the gale released from the thrashing waves.

Her hair whips over eyes, flashing lightning.

She stands at the cliff's edge, patient and unyielding.

Her voice, once unleashed, howls a tempest.

Her presence commands the seas,

Beautiful and ominous.

In the aftermath of her fierce display,

Silence follows, keeping fear at bay.

## Lessons from St. Therese of the Big Flower

By Kaitlyn Rodgers

**“I hope she doesn’t act like how she did after her grandmother died.”**

When I heard this from someone else, it was the nail in the proverbial coffin for my friend, Sarah, and me. I am not usually one to believe hearsay and my friend, Cat, had held off telling in hopes that Sarah would be better or do better. But, when she did—I knew that she and I had hit our walls.

Sarah and I had been friends since I was 13 years old. But, we became best friends more out of necessity than an affinity for each other. The longer I am away from our friendships, the more I realize it is completely one-sided. I did a lot of the supporting when we were younger. Her bad relationships, her drama with people and our other friends, her hatred and annoyance for certain things. But, I noticed the better my life became, the worse of a friend she was to me. But, her putting me down was something that was always prevailing in our friendship. When I got into Millersville, she said, “I guess that’s fine if you want to go to a state school.” She was always making comments about how much smarter she was than me but seemed to forget that even though she was ranked 5th in the class, I wrote her submission speech to be valedictorian (she wasn’t chosen).

This was a pattern that continued as I left college, but it was something that I didn’t pay attention to because I was deeply grieving the death of my grandmother. I just let life go by for me instead of actively participating. And, I fell into depression hard. I was having trouble getting a job right out of college. I was running myself into the ground with weddings, baby showers, and social events. I wasn’t happy. At all. And, the people that were supposed to be my support system were the ones that were keeping me there.

I knew that I had my family. But, at 22, I wanted to figure this stuff out for myself. Figure out who I was as a person and make sense of my new life as an adult. What I realize now is that I never had to figure out who I was, because deep inside I always knew. I just started to second-guess myself. I let my friends and a supposed mentor enter into a part of my brain that caused me to rethink and reconceptualize who I was as a person.

It became harder and harder to see through the dust that was becoming my life—no job, no money, no prospects. I felt like a character in a Jane Austen novel. But, somehow, the thing that helped me pull my head out of the sand was when my grandmother was diagnosed with cancer right before I had graduated college.



In May I remembered that my father called me on Saturday at school and said to me, “Kate, there is something that I have to tell you. Mommom is in the hospital. She has cancer.”

I remember where I was standing in my apartment. I remember my best friend looking at me like I was going to collapse. I remember my cousin running down from her apartment and us standing in my living room and crying. It was my worst fear revisited—first Nana, now Mommom.

If I wanted to give the women in my family a motto, it would be, “Take no shit, but do no harm.” Which would certainly be true for my grandmother, Therese. Or, just simply Mommom. Everyone called her Mommom. Our friends, the friends we made out at the pool, the lifeguards at the swim club we belonged to. She became a grandmother to everyone, and I certainly cannot blame them.

I have been incredibly lucky in my life to have wonderful relationships with both of my grandmothers. But I time that I was able to spend with my Mommom has always been so priceless and precious to me. Especially as I have gotten older. She might not have taught me to bake or cook, but she taught me how to call in a poker game and showed me how to live. My mom said that her mother was always very good at living life. As I have gotten older, she has said the same about me, but I could never put words to what she meant. I always thought it was because of Mommom’s resilience and strength. Or her faith in God and her love for her community. Because my grandmother should not have been good at living life. My grandmother should have run for hills, she should have been angrier, she should have been meaner. There were so many things that she should have or could have done with her life, that she didn’t.

If you had met the woman that I had known my entire life, you never would have guessed the trials and tribulations that my grandmother went through. When she was 38, with five children ranging between the ages of 16 to 8, she became a widow and a single mother. Then, two months after that, she lost her father, and then she would lose a child less than a decade later. One of those things life events would have sent someone into a spiral—but not my grandmother.

Therese Mary Cahill Kehoe was a force. Which, I have come to realize might be a trademark with all the women in my family. I am not sure that my grandmother would have labeled herself a feminist—she and I never really had that conversation. The way she grew up was unlike a lot of women in her time. She was one of the few girls in her school where her mother worked full-time. Nana Min was a bookkeeper—she graded Philadelphia Business School in 1919, being only one of 2 women in her class. So, the concept of women in the workplace was not something foreign to Mommom. She,

herself, started working part-time as a legal secretary when she was 16. She held that job until she married my grandfather and started a family. However, as my aunts, uncles, and mother got older, Mr. Smith wanted her back in the office. Mommom told me that Mr. Smith came to the house and asked my grandfather's permission for her to return to work.

If I knew then what I knew now, I would have asked the nuances of that conversation—how she reacted, how she felt Poppop making that decision for her. But, this was a woman who would ask her husband to scrub the kitchen floor as soon as he came home from work—and he did it. So, I would like to think it was more a partnered decision than a husband deciding for his wife. So, she would get my mom, the youngest, off to school and head to work. And then she would be there when my mother got home. However, after my grandfather died, she went back full-time—which was something that was not common for all women in my area.

I remember sitting at Church with my grandmother one Sunday and her friend, Mrs. Spera came into Mass. She said hello to my grandmother and took her seat. Mommom whispered to me (It's important to note that her church whisper was not a whisper, it was more of a shout. When we were at one of my sports banquets when I was in high school, one of the girls in my class walked by and Mommom "church whispered" to me, "Kate, who's that girl? She looked like a street walker." I wanted to die, the girl heard my grandmother, and my principal and the nuns started laughing at the table next to us.) "You know that Mrs. Spera lost her husband when she was young, too," I remember looking at this tiny sprite-like lady in front of us, and then at Mommom. I asked her simply, "Neither of you wanted to remarry?"

Mommom shook her head and smiled down at her rosary, "No, Kate. We didn't. We used to joke about who would have us with the number of kids that we had!" But, I think the truth of the matter was that she never wanted to remarry—she and my grandfather loved each other immensely. As she saw my face she would always laugh and reply, "And, besides, I raised 5 perfect children. At least that's what they keep telling me." Considering what she went through, all her kids were as close to perfect as you could have gotten with their circumstances.

These were the snapshots that I had with Mommom. And, they were the snapshots that I forgot during those long years of spiritual darkness, but slowly the more I spent time with her the more they came back into focus. Mommom (and Nana Min) had these catchphrases:

Anxious about something? "Say a prayer to the Holy Spirit to enlighten your mind."

Tough conversations with people you don't like? "They can't shoot you for thinking."

Feeling sorry for yourself? "Think of all the (insert whatever Third World Crisis or person that was suffering more than you here) who had to deal with ((random scenarios that she usually made up) Post 9/11 it was "Think of all the poor children in Afghanistan that have to eat dirt sandwiches").

But, the one that I should have listened to more closely in my time with her was "If you made a doormat out of yourself, people will walk all over you." I swear, I think Mommom and Nana Min heard these from other people and co-opted them for themselves. Nevertheless, that was the one that I wished would have kicked in a little sooner than it did. It would have saved me a lot of trouble.

Because I did let my friends walk all over me—and consistently put me down. And, I was stuck in this place of grief and nowhere to let it out. So, when she got sick, I was afraid all my feelings were going to compound each other. And, I almost missed the wonderful gifts that she gave me during the time that I spent with her. Apparently, in true Therse Kehoe fashion. She has known that she had cancer since February of that year, but she didn't tell anyone until May. Why? She didn't think it was anything to worry about. She was a determined woman. She was determined to get better and keep living her life as she had been for years. So, after her hospital stay, she would get up in the morning, go to mass, go to her radiation appointment, and then to work. I always understood that Mommom was celebrated by her friends and family for her strong character, can-do attitude, strong faith, and vibrance when it came to living. But, these were the times that I saw those qualities in her. This was when I started to really appreciate her not just as my grandmother, but as a woman. She gave me these fabulous snapshots and vinaigrettes of her life that I cherish for the lessons that she has taught me.

Mommom used to do our taxes for us. Her work with Mr. Smith I always thought made her qualified to take the bar exam. She was incredibly smart. She used to edit for the law review for the law practice she worked for; she did it until the day that she "retired." It was something that only she knew how to do, which no one realized until she was in the hospital after her heart attack.

I remember walking into her recovery room. She was lying on the bed, glasses perched on her nose, tray table pulled in front of her, red pen in hand. She wasn't writing in a newspaper, so I looked at her strangely. This is how our conversation proceeded and in parentheses are the lessons that I gleaned from them:

"Hi, Mommom. What are you doing?"

She looked up from her writing and smiled as I walked into the room, “Oh, there she is! How was work?” (**“Doesn’t matter what I am doing now, my family (favorite grandchild) is here”.** She loved her family about all else and showed up to everything that she could for her children and grandchildren—games, graduations, performances, and celebrations. Her family was her constant and her resounding strength through her difficult times).

“Hot, but it was fine. What are you reading?”

She took her glasses off and scrutinized my hair, “Your hair looks like a bird’s nest. Don’t you brush it in the morning? They really should get you air conditioning if you are going to work in that hot office outside.” (**This I have no profound lesson, but I think she wanted my hair to look nice because she thought it was pretty and wanted me to show it off. However, you do not think your grandmother is complimenting you at the moment. And, I worked at a swim club, and she nagged me every day until I begged my boss for an AC Unit.**)

Seeing that I would get no answer to my immediate question, I sat. I sighed loudly, “Would you like to take a brush to this head of hair in the morning, Mommom.”

“Fair point. Since it’s all over my bathtub and in my drain. But, you know people pay a lot of money to have what you have.” (**The first part was pretty straightforward. She wanted me to move out back to my house because my hair gets everywhere. But, the last part means, you should be grateful for what God gave you.**)

I rolled my eyes, “I know, Tre. Now, I have asked you three times what you were doing when I walked in. Do you need more crosswords? I can get one of those puzzle books at Rite Aid.

She placed her glasses back on her nose and smirked, “Well, it turns out that I am the only one who knows how to edit the law review. Because I have been doing it since I worked for Mr. Smith.”

“They never thought to ask someone else just in case,” I motioned to her in the bed.

“No. My boss visited me the other day and asked if Nancy could start bringing over papers for me to read and edit. I said I would. What else I am doing? You can never get any rest in these places anyway. Someone is always poking and prodding you.” (**My grandmother was never one to sit still for long. If there is something that you can and want to do, do it. It won’t take that long.**)

“But, you just had bypass surgery. You’re 81 years old. You’re recovering.”

“I want to do it. Besides, remember, I won the grammar pin in high school.” **(Never forget your accomplishments as you get older and live life. Celebrate them, remember them).**

That was something she was very good at—celebrating life. She loved it when the people she loved succeeded, and she was always the first to point out the amazing achievements of her children and grandchildren. But, just as she did that, she was able to hold a mirror to you and ask you to make sure you were being your best possible self. Even if it was pointing out little flaws. Mommom did our taxes. I remember when I signed my name once she looked at it and grimaced, “Who taught you how to sign your name like that? I know that they didn’t teach you that in school.” I just shrugged my shoulders as she looked at the chipped nail polish on my hand. She would scoff with a laugh. She would remind me of her penmanship pen from high school.

I would usually joke about how that served her after high school and she would just continue to lecture me about how nice handwriting was important. One time she added, though, “Well, it did earn me money in high school.” I looked at her with confusion as she said, “I used to forge report cards for my classmates.” I blinked at her. The only detention that I served in school, period, was my senior year when I jumped in yearbook photos of school clubs that I wasn’t a part of. I saw that as my great act of rebellion, but then I realized that I had no idea the type of rebellious and slightly chaotic women that I descended from.

I gave her a shocked expression and said, “You what?”

Mommom nodded, “I used to skip English Lit and go down to the coffee shop and forge report cards.”

Skipping class and forging signatures. When you first realize that your parents and grandparents are people who had lives that existed before you came around, it’s a weird thing to grasp. I can look at pictures of her in places that I know in young versions of herself. I can see her life as she lived it earlier, but it is a completely different thing when your grandmother admits to running a small enterprise.

I remember my grandmother and I were getting breakfast when she told me this, and we were right down the road from her old high school. I remember looking at her as if I was just introduced to this woman. I said, “Mommom, how? Why?” I had so many questions for clarification.

She smirked at me and said, “I hated English Lit, I didn’t like the nun that I had. We had to do the Canterbury Tales.” She rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue in disgust. (And, now since I have taken a class that was completely dedicated to Chaucer, I understand and endorse what she meant.) However, she wanted to capitalize on her time away from class. So, since she had the best handwriting in her grade, it meant she had the handwriting the closest to their nun’s. She would charge her classmates a nickel for every signature or number that was changed on the report cards. She practiced sevens and the very specific way of making an eight. And, people came to her—a lot. What she did with the money has long since been forgotten, but her mother used to take the money that she and her sister had, all of which was supposed to go to a convent and would donate half and use the other half to buy candy. So, I can only assume what my grandmother did with her profits.

That was her spirit. A little order, and a little chaos. She was an organized packrat. She was precise, but she was also a free spirit. It was amazing the way that she could praise someone, but also then set the bar higher for someone. She always looked for ways to be better and to expect better from those around her. One of the best lessons I have learned from her has been, “If I don’t want an answer, do not ask the question.” It was her way of saying that if you want to be validated and praised without challenge, then find someone else. Which is something that she embodied—she never really complained about her life, and she had plenty to complain about.

I would drive her to chemo appointments and her radiation appointments. She never talked much to other people about her illness, but you could tell she was starting to lose her zest for life. But, she still maintained her humor. I honestly think that she was just tired—she lived a life. She was good at living life. I remember when taking her to one of her appointments. We had to drive past the Planned Parenthood that was near her radiation appointment. I turned the corner on the street, and then my grandmother saw people from our parish outside of the church. Before I knew it, she had thrown herself on the floor of my car telling me to drive faster like we just robbed a bank.

I was very confused. I remember looking down at her, “What are you doing?”

She was scrunched as far as a 4’11, 80-year-old woman could go in a Kia Rio. She just started to wave her hand as she rasped, “Drive faster. Just slow down the car, I’ll get out.” **(I want to make a note that a female characteristic in my family is to try to exit vehicles while they are still moving. Something that I have managed to avoid adopting—unless my brother is driving.)**

I looked at her in shock, “What the hell is going on?”

Mommom scolded me, “It’s my friends from church. I don’t want them to see me.” **(It’s not that I don’t care if people find out. No everyone needs access to you and your information.)**

It wasn’t until she was gone that I learned these lessons. When she died in 2014, it felt different from when I lost my Nana. Of course, I was heartbroken. Again. At first, I didn’t think I would have to handle it, but then I would remember what Mommom would do or say. I would start to hear her in my head, “Kate, I am dead. There’s much to be done.” I remembered her practically about things. Yes, I would be sad that I would never be able to speak to her again, but that didn’t mean that she wasn’t still with me.

When I am on the retreat with our female students for school, the one thing I address in my talk to them is my brokenness. When my father died, it felt like a bigger hammer came and shattered the heart that I was working so hard to put back together. My feelings were in fragments, and I wasn’t sure if I would be able to navigate my life. But, I remembered my grandmother and her brokenness. I remember her broken hearts that she kept putting back together again. Grief is those shattered pieces that we never think are going to fit back together, but the gifts that come from grief — compassion, patience, the love — are what we use to start to put those pieces back together. Yes, those pieces will never perfectly fit back together into their original shape, but we can use our broken pieces and the lessons we learn to create a beautiful mosaic. We can create a new beautiful picture that is a better representation of who we are and what we have learned in life. It is a picture where we can learn to let our lights shine.

Sarah never truly got to see how I acted after my father died. I made a doormat of myself and she walked over me for too long, I showed up for her but she never showed up for me. I pulled up the doormat. She did not get to have access to me after I started to remember who I was at my core. But, sometimes I want to message her, “That I didn’t act like how I did when my grandmother died. I acted the way she did after her world fell apart and had to relearn who she was.”

## **The Witches' Trials**

By Kaitlyn Rodgers

Coven. A noun a collection  
A collection of individuals  
Of individuals thought to be witches  
Witches who want equal protection under the law  
The law that stops them from unleashing their true magic  
True magic in positions of power  
Positions of power for hope for a better future  
A better future for the sisters not yet born  
Sisters not yet born and the sisters who have gone before us

Because they didn't burn witches, they burned women.





# Skinny Jeans

The Princess  
of Wales  
You can't take  
away her side  
part and her  
skinny jeans

If they are  
good enough  
for the future  
Queen  
consort, they  
are good  
enough for me

Skinny Jeans  
for queens,  
kings, tweens,  
and everyone  
in between



Ode to My Son - Pauline Schmidt  
July 10, 2024

*This ode was written with the help of AI.*

*This was the prompt:*

Write an ode to my 18 year old son. His name is Robert. He is strong and smart. He cares about his family and his dog Bailey. He is going to college to become an architect.

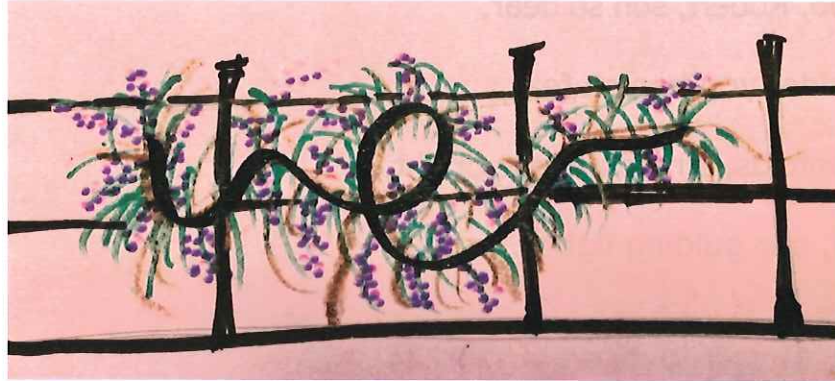
*And this was the ode:*

In the heart of youth, where dreams take flight,  
There stands a son, a beacon bright,  
Robert, strong in mind and soul,  
With ambitions that beautifully unfold.  
A future architect, with vision clear,  
Crafting worlds where dreams adhere,  
In his hands, structures rise with grace,  
Each design is a testament to his embrace.  
Yet not just buildings mark his way,  
His strength in kindness lights the day,  
For family and Bailey, steadfast and true,  
His love, a bond that forever grew.  
With every step, a legacy he crafts,  
In every smile, his spirit laughs,

Robert, at eighteen, a beacon of might,  
Guiding hearts with his gentle light.  
So here's to you, Robert, son so dear,  
With every stride, you banish fear,  
Your journey unfolds, a masterpiece bright,  
An ode to you, our guiding light.

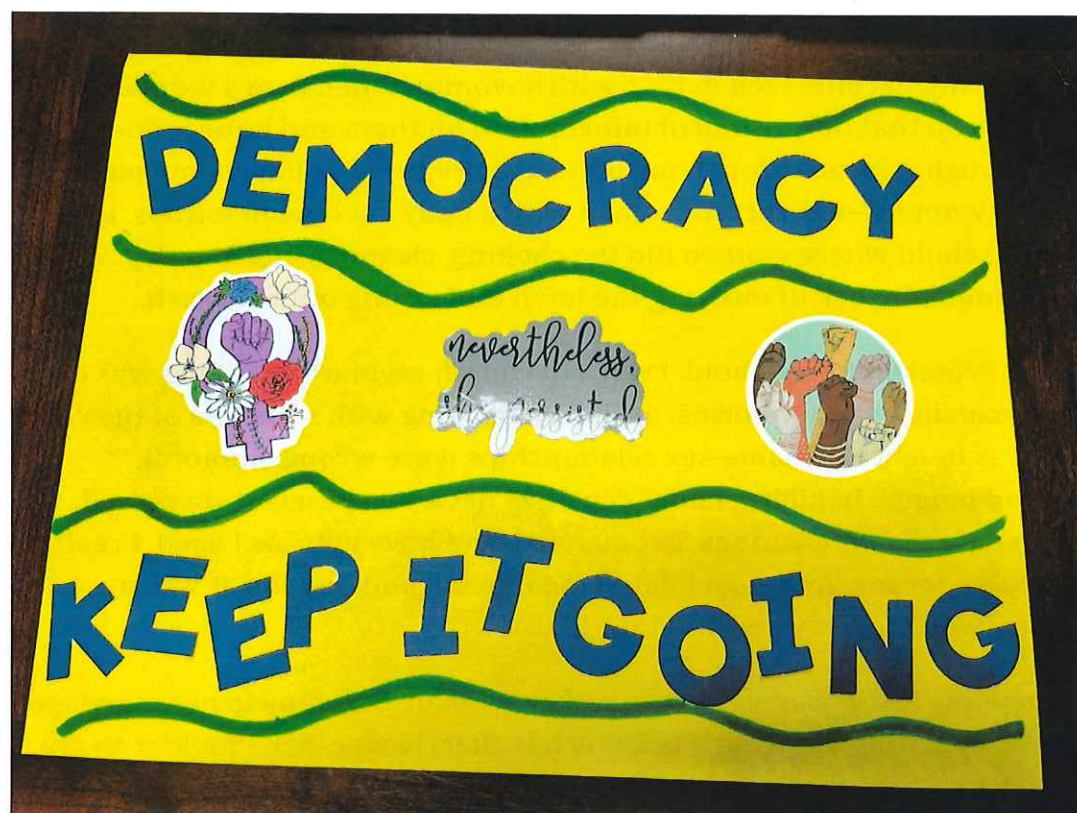
# Purple, Everywhere...

By Pauline Schmidt



This flourishing vine  
of wisteria  
started as a teeny, tiny sprout.  
Now, in its third summer,  
it has spread over a giant portion of our  
split-rail fence.  
Twisting &  
turning,  
it finds its way.  
Treating us  
to a spectacular explosion  
of purple  
every spring.





### The Future is Female -

When faced with something I'd like to promote, I chose DEMOCRACY. This fall, there is no other choice than to vote to continue our American experience. I am full of energy and hope as Joe Biden just announced that he is stepping down and our Democratic nominee is now Kamala Harris. I am trying - desperately - to temper my enthusiasm as I recall my 2016, post-election-emotionally draining experience.

This January, I would love to say the phrase,

"Today is the last day a woman has never been President."

## At the Kitchen Table: Sharing My Truth

By Bonnie Stritzinger

How do I tell my parents I fell in love with a woman when I am a woman myself? How do I drop that bombshell of information on them and hope it doesn't explode? These thoughts raced through my mind as I prepared to inform my parents that I was dating a woman—a divorced woman with a body covered in tattoos. I grew up in a formal household where women did the cooking, cleaning, and laundry, while the men did the “men's” work of mowing the lawn and taking out the trash.

Raised in a Protestant household, I went to church regularly. Nothing was ever preached about sexuality, gender norms, or the sin of being with someone of the same sex. However, I was taught that same-sex relationships were wrong, immoral, frowned upon, and judged. In high school, “gay” was not a term used or discussed. We were expected to date the opposite sex, get married, and have kids. As I aged, I realized that was not the plan for me. Although I dated men throughout my life, it was a wonderful woman who stole my heart.

I met Jenn when she was married to another woman. Unhappy in her marriage and in the process of getting divorced, I became her cheerleader, her shoulder to cry on, and her support system during those six months. Through that time, we grew close. We discovered we had more in common than we realized. She was sweet to me, often sending flowers and telling me, despite my “straight” orientation, she planned on “wooing” me. And woo me she did!

We dated for almost a year before coming out as a couple. I feared rejection from family and friends, judgments from colleagues and students, and possibly their parents as well. Jenn, proud to be a lesbian from a young age, had a very different upbringing. Her parents were labeled “Low IQ” in the late 70s, so she raised them more than they raised her. She never worried about answering to anyone, having a curfew, pleasing her parents, or any real responsibilities.

When Jenn asked, “When are you going to tell your parents we are dating?” I was filled with doubts and fears. She didn't understand the turmoil in my head or the weight of that question on my heart. My upbringing was different. Born in the 70s to Baby Boomer parents, I was raised with a conformed idea of what society should be. I wasn't ashamed of dating Jenn—I had fallen head over heels in love with her, and she made me truly happy. But how to present that to my parents consumed me.

For about three months, Jenn didn't understand why telling my parents was such a big deal. She often said, "If we are happy, why are you worried? Telling them shouldn't be a bad thing or a hard thing. I just don't get it." I had to explain that no matter my age, I never wanted to disappoint or upset my parents. I honestly didn't know how they would react, and that scared me. Would they disown me?

Make me choose between them and her? Be ashamed, embarrassed, or disappointed? Those thoughts often stopped me in my tracks, preventing me from taking the plunge to just say something!

To build my confidence, I decided to use my grade partners as guinea pigs to gauge their reactions. We eat lunch together every day, know each other well, and have shared many personal stories, so I felt comfortable revealing my truth to them. Their reactions brought such joy and relief to my heart. They said things like, "We had a feeling you were dating Jenn because you talk about her all the time with a smile on your face," and "You are happier than you've been in a long time." Their words of support and happiness gave me the confidence and strength I needed to share this with my parents.

The next step was telling my sister, niece, and nephew about Jenn and me. My niece and nephew were over the moon excited and didn't hesitate after I told them. My sister responded exactly as I expected, "Omg! How long have you been dating? Why didn't you tell me sooner? I am so happy for you! This is the happiest I have seen you in a long time!" I could finally exhale. I asked my sister to join me when I decided to break the news to our parents, and she agreed.

The entire drive home to Wilkes-Barre, my sister and I talked through many scenarios and how we could respond if things took a negative turn. After a while, she calmly said, "I think mom and dad will be okay with this. It may be a shock to their system, but they will love and support you no matter what." Hearing those exact words from my sister was more reassuring than I anticipated.

We arrived Friday around five o'clock, settled in, then went out to dinner. Midway through our meal, I could feel my sister's eyes boring a hole through my brain, urging me with glances, "Hey sis, are you going to tell them? What are you waiting for?" She was right, but I still wasn't ready. I feared ruining dinner or causing a scene at the restaurant. I needed the night to sleep on it.

Saturday rolled around, and there we were, sitting at the kitchen table, eating our favorite local pizza. The delicious taste of home gave me the push I needed. Next thing I know, the words came flooding out of my mouth like Niagara Falls. "So, mom and dad, you know Jenn, you like Jenn, you think she's great, well so do I, and we're

dating!” The sentence erupted from my mouth like a volcano, and I wasn’t sure if they understood a single word I said. After a moment of silence that felt like forever, my mom said, “Come again.” I repeated, “Jenn and I are dating. We’ve been dating for some time, and I’m really happy.” As I spoke, I heard my sister say to our father, “Dad, this is a good thing. Bonnie is so happy and hasn’t been this happy for a long time!” Thank God she was there. I couldn’t have done this without her.

As my mom processed the news, my dad got up from his chair, walked over to me, and gave me a huge hug. I exhaled and almost cried. Months of playing “worst case” scenarios on repeat in my mind, building up anxiety, worry, doubt, and fear, finally released into the comfort of my daddy’s arms. I knew instantly that everything was going to be okay. As he released me, he said, “If you love Jenn, we will love her too. Your happiness means more to us than anything else.” My dad’s words floored me, lifting me out of the dark and into the light. Relief washed over me, but the moment abruptly halted when he said, “Get Jenn on the phone.” Gulp. My mom hadn’t said anything yet.




When Jenn answered my call, I said, “You’re on speaker.” My mom took the phone from me and said, “Hi Jenn.” I stood there like a deer in headlights, anticipating her response. Seconds felt like eternity. Nothing prepared me for what she said next. “Are you sure you want to date my daughter? She is quite the handful.” Laughter and relief released from my body like a tidal wave crashing on the shoreline. It felt wonderful. More laughter ensued as my parents and Jenn exchanged polite conversation on speakerphone.

As I stood there, feeling relieved, I realized our kitchen table had always been the most important place in our home. It was the place for many family meals, meaningful Sunday dinners, and deep conversations. A place where stories about school, life, work, loss, and love were shared. Not much had changed about our kitchen—the 70s wallpaper still clung to the walls with its dull orange, green, brown, and yellow flower patterns. The oven hadn’t moved, and the kitchen table remained in the same spot. It was a poignant moment, sitting at the table, surrounded by memories that had always comforted me during visits home—the very place where I finally shared my truth with my parents. The comfort of the kitchen helped me do so, creating a moment of nostalgia.

As I sit here writing my story, my thoughts drift back to that moment in our family’s kitchen, where another memory was created and will forever be a fixture in the house I grew up in. Gazing upon my wedding ring, I realize it’s my happy ending to telling my truth.



## Author Bios

<p><b>Lauren Durante</b></p> 	<p>Lauren is a 7th grade Writing teacher at Avon Grove Middle School. She is heading into her 2nd year in education this fall, and she is starting to work towards her master's degree at West Chester University this year. Lauren is passionate about building student confidence through writing, and continuing to learn alongside her students.</p>
<p><b>Jen Greene as Sarah Sanderson</b></p> 	<p>Jen is the Assistant Director of the WCWP and an elementary school teacher at Penn Wood Elementary in the West Chester Area School District. She will start her 21st year in education this fall, turning back into a fourth grade teacher after a delightful era teaching second graders.</p>
<p><b>Justine Imburgio</b></p> 	<p>Justine is a high school English teacher in the School District of Philadelphia. She is just embarking on her master's degree in English and her third year into teaching in the public school system. She is passionate about bringing creative modes to teaching writing and using writing as a mode to learn about the world around you.</p>

Elyse McDevitt



Elyse McDevitt is an eleventh-grade American Literature and AP Language and Composition teacher at Oxford Area High School. As she heads into her eighth year of teaching this fall, Elyse is also marking the end of her graduate studies at West Chester University with the close of this institute. Elyse values her status as a lifelong learner, and she looks forward to strengthening her craft as a teacher with all she's learned this summer.

Nina Photiades



Nina is a dedicated middle school teacher entering her fifth year in the 8th grade classroom. Currently pursuing her master's degree, she is set to graduate from WCU in the spring of 2025. Her commitment to education and continuous professional development reflects her enthusiasm for inspiring the next generation.

Kaitlyn Rodgers as Professor McGonagal



Kaitlyn is a 10th grade and AP Literature and Composition teacher at Monsignor Bonner and Archbishop Prendergast Catholic High School. This is her 11th year teaching and is currently working on her Ed.D at West Chester University where her research is focused on curriculum studies and Catholic education.



Pauline Schmidt as Winifred Sanderson



Pauline is the Director of the WCWP and a Professor of English Education at West Chester University. She is heading into her 30th year as an educator this fall and her (lucky) 13th year here at WCUPA. She is currently working on new research that involves getting teachers out of their classrooms for meaningful learning experiences. Stay tuned...for some adventures!

Bonnie Stritzinger



Bonnie is an Elementary School Teacher at Garrettford Elementary in the Upper Darby School District. She is beginning her 21st year of teaching and 12th year as a fabulous 1st grade teacher. She is currently working on her Master's Plus! She is also a small business owner. She is currently journaling and writing about her recent experience in a Reality TV show to be aired in 2025! She looks forward to continuing her education so that she may continue to inspire and BE INSPIRED by all of her future "Littles."







