

A GIFT FOR YOU FROM
Ellen E. Withers

A Collection
of
Short Stories



*A Collection
of
Short Stories*

A GIFT FOR YOU FROM
Ellen E. Withers

CONTENTS

Color Blind	1
The Disappearance Of Billy Fontaine	4
Over the Edge	10
Sock It To Me	19
The Man Who Talked to the North Pole	23
<i>About the Author</i>	28

COLOR BLIND

After her first day of kindergarten, my smiling five-year-old daughter hopped off the school bus. I gave her a quick hug and watched her run to the kitchen. Allison pulled a drawing from her backpack and moved the artwork on the refrigerator to make room for her newest masterpiece.

“Oh Allison, that is beautiful.” I invited her to sit down at the table and said, “Tell me about your day,” as I slid a bowl of applesauce in her direction.

Between spoons of applesauce, she said, “I have a brand new friend. Her name is Jasmine. She sits right behind me and she likes to draw, too.”

“How wonderful,” I replied. She’d formed a friendship in only one day and with someone who shared her artistic passion.

My daughter inherited her artistic talent from my mother. I’d wished to be able to paint and draw as a child, but the gene had skipped me. When I recognized Allison’s potential, I tried to nurture her talents with art lessons. As she grew, her fondness for the plethora of supplies grew with her. No small crayon box seemed right for her; she needed the sixty-four color spectrum.

After school each day, Allison described what she and Jasmine had created and relayed their adventures during recess.

The friendship blossomed. Only once did Allison mention a problem.

“Sometimes, a couple of kids at school are mean to Jasmine,” Allison said. “We run away from them.”

“Does Jasmine get her feelings hurt?”

“Sort of, but she knows we’re best friends. We just find another place to play.”

“Why don’t you tell your teacher about it,” I said. “She will keep an eye on the troublemakers and make them leave you in peace.”

One day, Allison got off the bus, eyes brimming with tears. As she spilled her sad burden, her lips quivered. “Jasmine is moving away. I’ll never see her again.”

After wiping away tears and blowing her runny nose, we sat at the kitchen table and mourned the impending loss of her best friend.

When Allison decided to draw a picture of the two of them to give to Jasmine as a going away present, she felt better about the sorrowful news. Allison gathered her jumbo box of crayons while I searched for poster board. She worked on her masterpiece, tongue pushed to the corner of her mouth, deep in the creative mode.

Night after night, Allison dedicated her time to the project. When it was complete, I offered to drive her to school so her picture wouldn’t be damaged on the bus.

The next morning, we carefully loaded her canvas into the car. It was a depiction of two girls, holding hands in the middle of a playground. I noticed her stick figures were two different shades. I questioned my young Picasso about the discrepancy.

“I’ve done it right,” she replied. “Jasmine’s mommy is a peach person and her daddy is a brown person, so she’s some of both.”

My five-year-old’s blunt delivery took me by surprise. My mind translated her statement and I realized the girl who loved all colors of an artist’s palette, also loved all colors of skin.

My little peach person slid out of the car, carefully stowed the drawing for her friend, and waved good-bye.

I waved back, never more proud to be her mother.

SILVER BOOMER BOOKS published this true story in *Silver Boomers*, a collection of prose and poetry by and about Baby Boomers in 2008.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF BILLY FONTAINE

At dawn, Miss Belinda Parrott threw back her sheets and stepped out of bed. Sleep was no longer an option.

Last night, dusk arrived early because of a storm. Although lights glowed at every nearby house, her next-door neighbor's house remained dark. Billy even failed to answer her many phone calls.

With flashlight in hand, she crossed the narrow strip of grass separating their homes and hammered on the back door. Finding it unlocked, she opened the door and called his name. She found he did have power, but that was all she found. His narrow Victorian-era home, almost a twin of hers, offered multiple nooks and crannies for her to check, but without reward.

Today, fear motivated her to walk to the police station to report his absence. The morning was steamy from yesterday's afternoon storm, and her crisp cotton dress lost its starched appearance within moments. She slowed to wipe perspiration from her upper lip with the cotton handkerchief she kept tucked in her purse, but this was the only pause. The intoxicating smell of honeysuckle and beautiful vistas of her hometown were lost upon her today.

With a nod, she rushed passed Julia Cummings unloading her

groceries. On a normal day, Belinda would have stopped for a chat, but today was anything but normal.

Entering the air-conditioned police station, she relished the pleasant absence of humidity and approached a disinterested receptionist who'd long neglected her dark roots. When she relayed the reason for her visit, the receptionist snapped her chewing gum in a cow-like manner and pointed a painted talon to a desk.

The police officer was as wide as the desk he occupied. He was on the phone so she perched on the edge of a chair and listened as Officer Greene butchered the King's English. Before she retired, she'd devoted her life to educating local children. Somehow, she'd missed this one.

The officer eventually turned his attention to her. As she explained her mission, the large man grinned, revealing a row of uneven teeth dotted with silver fillings.

She shot him a look of displeasure. "This is not humorous, sir."

His smile faded. "Sorry, ma'am. We're busy with somethin' else right now. I'm bookin' somebody for assault and battery right this very second. Now Miss Parrott, why don't ya go on back home and come back later to file your report? You know, when we're not quite so busy 'round here."

She peered at him through wire frame glasses. "I'm not going anywhere. I implore you to take this matter seriously. Mr. Fontaine would not have left town without locking his home and telling me."

"You sure?"

"Of course. Someone could have kidnapped him, or he could be sick or murdered! I've called and no one has seen him. Whatever the situation, it's nothing to be taken lightly."

"Well, ma'am, like I tol' ya, we already got our hands full bookin' that feller for assault and battery." He gestured toward the lock down cells.

She recognized the man behind bars and her lips tightened

into a most unladylike position. “You and I both know that Pauly Chase is repeatedly arrested.”

The officer nodded.

“I’m surprised you don’t have a set of monogrammed sheets for him. Why his poor little wife puts up with his beatings I don’t know but you can hold the paperwork for Pauly until you check on Mr. Fontaine and justice will still be served.”

“I can’t just up and leave ‘cause ya says so.”

A frosty look passed from them.

She raised a crooked finger toward the door displaying “Police Chief” in red letters. “I suggest we talk to him.”

Eyeball to eyeball, it was the officer who blinked, losing the battle of wills to his elder. “I guess it won’t hurt none to take a quick drive down to Mr. Fontaine’s house fer a look-see.”

She nodded and rose from the chair.

“Miss Parrott, I’ll carry ya to his house,” the officer called. “Come on with me.”

The horror of his suggestion seared through her. She paused momentarily to gather her tattered dignity. “I’ve lived all my life without riding in a law enforcement vehicle, and I’m certainly not going to start now.” Spinning on the heel of her sensible brown shoe, she stalked past the receptionist as she exited.

Walking home, she had an additional incentive to hurry, so she passed Raynell on her porch and Earlene in her flower garden with only a wave.

She reached Billy’s house before the officer arrived, but only by a second or two. With her toe tapping a staccato rhythm on her neighbor’s wooden stoop, she watched Officer Greene park in the driveway and haul himself out of the patrol car.

“Hello again, Miss Parrott. I see ya there at the side door, but I need ta check the front, don’t ‘cha know.”

The officer rapped on the front door, then checked the windows for signs of forced entry. He walked all the way around the home, eventually reappearing at the side door where she eyed him with a steady gaze. After pounding on the door

without reply, he pushed it open and called, “Mr. Fontaine? Mr. Fontaine, are ya in here?”

Although previously in every room, she willed herself to be patient while he explored the interior. The officer even climbed the steep stairs to the attic, all to no avail.

Outside, they probed under the wrap-around porch and then covered the grounds of the house. Billy’s vegetable garden lined a corner of the property in neat rows, not a weed anywhere. The flower garden burst forth with multi-colored blossoms and irresistible floral scents, the bed strategically placed to divert attention from the berm created by the storm cellar. The result was beautiful, abounding with summer hues, yet so absolutely devoid of Billy.

Ivy-covered trellises decorated the exterior of the garage, formerly a carriage house during the Victorian era. Inside sat Billy’s older-model Buick. The garage walls were dotted with shelves filled with gardening tools, while buckets, hoses and pots of various sizes were neatly in place on the dirt floor, waiting for their missing gardener.

When Officer Greene left, he promised to complete a missing person’s report.

She fought panic as she entered her home. What happened to Billy?

That evening she couldn’t relax enough to sleep, sparring with her sheets like a prizefighter. She prayed to God for his help with this situation and gave her burden to the Lord.

Even the cat seemed to pick up her concerns and began pawing at the bed sheets. She reached her tolerance for the cat’s activities and shooed him away. Offended by the reprimand, he jumped up to a shelf above the dresser and curled into a furry ball.

She rolled over. The cat was silly to hide when scolded.

Then, Belinda’s eyes popped open. Hiding! Could that be why they couldn’t find Billy?

She turned on her bedside lamp and plucked the phone book

from the drawer. Her hands shook with excitement while she popped on her glasses and searched for the police station number.

“Eureka Springs Police.”

“To whom am I speaking?”

“Officer Sims, ma’am”

“This is Miss Parrott. Is this Johnny Sims, my former student?”

“Yes, ma’am it is.”

“Good. You always seemed to be a relatively bright boy.”

“Ah—Thank you, ma’am.”

“Johnny, I filed a missing person report earlier today.”

“Yes, ma’am. We’ve alerted the third shift about Mr. Fontaine.”

“I think I might know where he is. Will you send someone immediately?”

“Certainly, ma’am. I’ll be right there.”

“Thank you. I’ll meet you at Mr. Fontaine’s house.” Without waiting for his reply, she put down the receiver and rose to dress. It wouldn’t do for her to greet a police officer in her nightgown and robe.

Realizing she’d forgotten something very important, she sat back down on the edge of her bed, laced her fingers together and bowed her head in prayer. “Thank you Lord, for giving me a sign.”

After she dressed, she hurried across the lawn as a police car pulled into Billy’s driveway.

“Miss Parrott.” Officer Sims tipped his hat. “Always a pleasure.”

She smiled. “I believe the Lord has given me a clue to Billy’s location.” Then she took the officer’s left arm and led him behind Billy’s garage as he shined a flashlight at the ground. Eventually, the wooden door of the storm cellar was illuminated.

“I believe Mr. Fontaine might be down there. If he is, he must be injured.”

The officer reached down and tugged on the handle of the door, then struggled to pull it open. Handing Miss Parrott his flashlight, Sims said, "If he's here, it's because he couldn't open the door."

With effort, he opened the door and hurried down the stairs of the musty-smelling cellar.

Billy stepped into the small circle of light provided by the flashlight.

"Are you hurt, Mr. Fontaine?"

"Other than a splinter or two from fighting that door, I'm fine." Billy peered up and around Sims. "Belinda? I hoped you'd find me."

With the assistance of the officer, Mr. Fontaine climbed the steps to freedom.

Sims gave Fontaine a quick look from head to toe with the flashlight. "You seem to be in good shape, sir, but can I take you to the hospital to be checked out?"

"Oh no, that won't be necessary."

Billy turned to Belinda. "When I couldn't get out of there, I panicked. No one knew where I was. With my luck, I figured I'd starve to death."

He reached for his neighbor's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I can't thank you enough for finding me. I spent the hours down there praying you'd look for me."

"The Lord heard your prayers," she said. "Welcome back."

THE DISAPPEARANCE of Billy Fontaine was originally published in the Ozark Writers League anthology, *Echoes of the Ozarks*, Volume Three, in 2007.

OVER THE EDGE

“I’m grateful for your help, Sheriff.” Eva Peters made her proclamation from the front seat of her tilted car.

“No problem, Miss Eva,” Bobby Wilson called out as he wiped the sweat off his brow with his uniform sleeve and tightened the last of the lug nuts on the spare tire of the older-model Chevrolet Caprice.

He lowered the car to the rocky shoulder of the Ozark Mountain highway and tossed the jack, the shredded tire and wheel into the trunk. As he walked to the driver’s side of the car, he wiped the dirt from his hands onto his slacks.

“Miss Eva, how’d you end up in this ditch?”

Eva’s arthritic fingers plucked at her shirt collar while she avoided his gaze. “Oh, well—ah—I just found myself there.”

“Miss Eva, we know this isn’t the first wreck you’ve had recently. Sam told me the other day you ran into a curb with enough force to warp your tire rim.”

Eva looked at him sheepishly. “That’s right, Sheriff. It hit so hard, my teeth almost popped out of my mouth.”

Bobby bit back a smile at the thought of Eva’s store-bought teeth sailing through the air and rolling around the floorboard of her car like a roulette marble.

“With a glance down this road, I can see you drove off the shoulder several times before you punctured your tire on the big rock in that ditch.” Bobby jabbed his finger toward the offending piece of stone. “I think I’m gonna have to take your license this time.”

“But my car is my freedom, Sheriff.”

“I have the right to confiscate your driver’s license if you’re a threat to the general public.” Bobby placed his hands on his hips and didn’t allow sympathy to enter the conversation. “Miss Eva, I’d say you’ve become a threat. Sam and your daughter-in-law will drive you anywhere you want to go.”

“It’s not the same.”

“You’re right, but you’ll be safe and so will others using the road.”

“Speaking of safe, Sheriff, I can hardly sleep at night since you told me about the cemetery vandalism.”

“Don’t worry too much about it, Miss Eva. The grave-robbers haven’t returned and I’ve got my deputies patrolling there every couple of hours now.”

“But it’s only a block from my home. What if devil worshippers are traipsing through my yard at night?”

“I really don’t think we have devil worshippers here in IZARD County, but if you hear something, call me.”

A yellow GMC truck swung wide around them on the highway and Eva waived at them. “Look, Sheriff. It’s Norwood and Louise Pruitt.”

Bobby shook his head. She’d provided the names of every traveler that passed them since he discovered her disabled car on the side of the road.

He squatted down to face her. “I’m going to follow you home, just to make sure you get there safely. Then you’ll tell Sam you’re giving up driving. If you don’t, I’ll arrest you the next time you’re on the road.

Eva blinked back tears behind her thick glasses.

Hurting this sweet lady made Bobby feel as bitter as the

black sludge his new deputy called coffee. But no matter how pathetic she looked, she was a menace upon the roads of his county.

The radio on Bobby's hip squawked to life. After a brief conversation, he turned back to Eva. "I can't follow you; there's been an accident up ahead. Promise me you'll drive straight home?"

"If'n you insist, Sheriff."

"I do."

Bobby added through her open window, "I'm serious about arresting you. I won't let you kill yourself or someone else on these winding, steep two-lane roads."

With her forehead barely visible above the steering wheel and hands clutching the wheel like a drowning man grasping a life preserver, Eva slowly drove away. As she crisscrossed the yellow line, he kicked himself for not pulling her license a long time ago.

Moments later, he parked his patrol car behind his newest deputy's unit. The gravel along the shoulder of the road crunched beneath his boots as he approached the crest of Beaver Hill. The deputy peered into the deep ravine below. Smoke and smells from the burning vehicle rose up to assault them.

"What do we have, Lewis?"

"We got a call from—" The deputy quickly fingered his notes. "Ah, Karen Lawrence. She reported seeing a burning car plunge over the side of the cliff, right here."

Bobby scrutinized the area, and then turned to Lewis. "Was she behind the car when it went over?"

"No. Seems she was over there at the time." The deputy pointed to the road on the next ridge.

"Any description of the vehicle?"

"None." Lewis ran his hand through his hair. "Dispatch has requested the paramedics. I told them to call Dennis Towing and tell them to bring their biggest truck."

Bobby liked to see the novice deputy thinking ahead, but

felt compelled to point out a problem. “Lewis, if the car’s burning, it’ll be hours before its cool enough to tow back up this hill.”

Lewis was crestfallen. “I didn’t think about that.”

Bobby thumped Lewis’ back. “You will next time.”

With an experienced eye, Bobby saw the distinct outline of tire tracks cutting vertically across the soft gravel shoulder. They continued through a large hole in the guardrail and ended abruptly at the edge of the precipice.

Over a month ago, a tractor-trailer truck had ripped out over ten feet of the rail and the state’s highway maintenance hadn’t yet had time to replace it. Bobby surmised they’d be out here tomorrow, now that someone had gone over the cliff.

He crossed to the other side of the highway and realized something was missing. He called to Lewis, “I’ve noticed something unusual. Come see if you can figure it out.”

Lewis made his way across the roadway and studied the scene. “It’s easier to see where the tires cut across the gravel from over here.”

“That’s right, but there’s more. Or, I should say, less.”

“I don’t get it.”

“No skid marks.”

Lewis’ eyes widened. “How could a driver plunge over a cliff and not try to stop?”

“Brake failure is a possibility,” Bobby replied, “or a heart attack, stroke, or even diabetic coma. If a tire blew or a wheel broke, you’d probably see evidence of that on the road.”

The wail of the ambulance siren signaled its arrival, causing Bobby and Lewis to hurry back to the other side of the road.

After quickly strapping on mountain rescue gear, two of the more experienced medical crew disappeared over the edge of the ridge.

When Bobby and Lewis helped pull one of the paramedics back to the top, the man’s solemn face told the story.

“That bad?” Bobby asked.

“Worse,” said the paramedic. “It’s a truck. Too hot to approach, but you can see the driver’s still strapped in there.”

Bobby let his imagination fill in the blanks.

“Any idea as to race or sex?”

“None and wouldn’t venture a guess, either.”

Bobby turned to Lewis. “Tell dispatch to send the coroner.”

“It looks like an old Ford truck,” the paramedic said. “The paint’s burned off, so I don’t have a color. The fire was heaviest at the front which allowed the license plate to survive the heat. It’s ZCV-9956.”

Lewis called in the plate number and within seconds, had the vehicle owner. “Hey Sheriff, it’s registered to Leroy Duggar. Need the address?”

“Nope,” Bobby replied. He knew the way to Leroy’s shack in the hills all too well. The last time he drove out there it was to arrest him for operating a meth lab. Now it fell to him to notify the family that someone, likely Leroy, had died in their truck.

Bobby turned back to the paramedic. “You sure there’s only one body in there?” He wondered whether it was Leroy or his wife, or both, in there. God forbid, even some of their children?

“Only one, Sheriff, unless someone’s on the floorboard. It was too hot to get close enough for that kind of inspection.”

Several hours later, Bobby returned to his office and started filling out the reports required for a fatal accident.

Tomorrow the paperwork would be off his desk, but how long would it take to be rid of the horrible image engraved in his mind? The burned corpse inside the charred remnants of the truck frame would walk with him for a long time.

“Got a minute?” asked John Paul Huggins, IZard County Coroner and partner in a family owned funeral business.

Bobby smiled at his old friend. “Haven’t I seen you enough for one day?” He indicated for John Paul to take a seat. “Tough business, wasn’t it?”

“Some shyster lawyer is probably already knocking on Sharon Dugger’s door telling her she can make millions of dollars by

suing Ford or the highway department.” John Paul leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. “I’m sure you hear about stuff like that all the time.”

“That truck was old and falling apart,” Bobby said. “It’s too old for the manufacturer to be held responsible. With Leroy’s history, I’d put my money on a drug overdose or some such.”

“The autopsy will include tests for drugs and alcohol.”

“Doesn’t it seem odd that Leroy would suffer a tragic accident right before he’s supposed to go on trial for manufacturing meth?”

“Bobby, you’re suspicious about everybody and everything.”

“Leroy spent more time in my jail than anyone in the county and he hated every moment of it,” Bobby declared as he fiddled with a pen on his desk. “I can’t even list all his crimes. There was burglary, pyramid schemes, growing pot and then the meth lab. A drug manufacturing conviction would’ve put him in prison for decades.”

“It sure was a hot fire.”

“That’s another thing that bugs me. Why did the truck catch on fire before it went over the side? The witness reported huge flames when it was still on top of the ridge.”

“Did it bang into a tree or something?”

“We checked everywhere and there was no trace of any damage like that. The only scenario that works is the possibility the truck was in such bad shape, it caught on fire while he was driving. In his excitement to pull over, he could have driven through the gap of the guardrail and over the edge.”

John Paul nodded. “That sounds logical.”

“Without skid marks, I’d have to guess the fire was caused by the brake system or it deactivated the brakes.”

John Paul looked at his watch. “I’ve got to head out of here to help with Pearl Johnson’s visitation.”

“Tell Pearl’s family I’ll be at the funeral tomorrow.” He waived his hand over his desk. “Unfortunately, paperwork is going to keep me here tonight.”

“See you tomorrow then.”

As John Paul stepped out into the hall, Bobby called out to him. “Are you handling the funeral of Leroy Duggar?”

“Yes,” John Paul answered as he reappeared in the office. “Once the state releases the body. After that, if Mrs. Duggar has an attorney, they’ll probably want to run some tests themselves. Then we’ll get to the funeral.”

Bobby rolled his eyes. “Wouldn’t it be ironic if Leroy’s death causes his family to finally receive all the money he’s been trying to chase down during his lifetime?”

“Mrs. Duggar already called the office about getting a death certificate.”

“What?”

“Her insurance agent told her to call us about the death certificate, ‘cause they won’t pay out on life insurance without one.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that she called about getting a death certificate before the body’s cold? She sure didn’t seem too broken up today when I delivered the bad news.”

“I really haven’t thought about it.”

Bobby shook a finger at John Paul. “There’s a reason why I’m the sheriff and you’re the coroner, you know. In my line of work, we call that motive.”

“You’re so suspicious.”

“Do you think a career criminal like Leroy would have much life insurance?”

“Well, maybe there’s accidental death coverage under the vehicle. Mrs. Duggar was probably making a claim on the truck and heard about the other coverage or something.”

“Or something,” Bobby repeated as he reached for his reading glasses. “Who’s her agent?”

“Sandra Lynn.”

Bobby called the agent and when he hung up, he peered over the top of his glasses at John Paul. “Not only did they have accidental death coverage for the vehicle, they recently

purchased a large term life policy on Leroy. They wanted to get it before he went on trial.”

“Isn’t that the smart thing to do?”

“It is,” Bobby replied, “but when did Leroy ever do the smart thing?”

John Paul shrugged. “How much insurance are we talking about?”

“A half a million dollars worth, with double indemnity for an accidental death.”

John Paul whistled. “That’s a lot of money for someone around here.”

“That’s a lot of money anywhere.”

Bobby’s suspicious mind churned from the time John Paul left until he finished his paperwork. He couldn’t shake the feeling he’d missed something. Something small. It buzzed around him like a mosquito; whining, unstoppable and constantly annoying. He rose from his desk and cut the office light with a forceful chop of his hand. What was he missing?

The following morning, Bobby stood in the vestibule of the funeral home where Pearl Johnson’s family and friends were gathering to say their final farewell. He couldn’t resist a smile when Miss Eva approached him, followed by her son, Sam.

“Morning, Miss Eva,” Bobby said. “Did Sam drive you here?”

“I have no choice in the matter since you forced me to stop driving.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Yes and I’m mad you didn’t tell me about Leroy Duggar’s accident.”

“But Miss Eva,” Bobby protested, “I didn’t know it was Leroy until long after you left. We had to call in the license plate number to discover who owned the truck.”

“When did it happen?”

“Just a few minutes before they called me on the radio.”

Miss Eva looked at Bobby in confusion. “Then why didn’t I see him drive by when you were changing my tire?”

Bobby stared at her for a second and then gave her a hug. “You’re a mighty fine detective, Miss Eva.”

Bobby hustled over to interrupt John Paul’s conversation with the preacher. “John Paul, Leroy Duggar never drove past me yesterday while I changed Miss Eva’s tire. Since that’s the only road Leroy could take to town, I guarantee his demise is just a ruse.”

“What are you talking about?” John Paul asked, perplexed.

“I think the body in that truck was stolen from the cemetery. I imagine a very healthy Leroy Duggar is hiding out somewhere—to be joined by his wife and kids once they collect the insurance money.”

John Paul turned to the preacher. “And, just yesterday, I accused our Sheriff of having a suspicious mind.”

OVER THE EDGE was published in the Ozark Writers League anthology, *Echoes of the Ozarks*, Volume One, in 2005.

SOCK IT TO ME

Mom and Dad were getting ready to go out to a special event; my brother and I, both teenagers, were staying home. I strolled into the living room and found Dad dressed in a burgundy leisure suit, sitting in front of the television. People not raised by an artist might call it dark red, but such a vague description would not have passed muster in my house.

I was born to an artist, but somehow failed to inherit the same ability that fueled my mother's soul. She adored beauty, admired and commented on textures, shapes and styles, and spoke in a language of descriptive color. Artists would have appreciated this dialect, but it left rest scratching their heads.

"Why that vehicle is positively chartreuse," she'd say with disgust.

My brother, Steve, and I would exchange glances, neither willing to admit we were clueless about what she meant. We took after our father's side of the family. They were hardworking, fun-loving people, but no artists in the bunch. I can't speak for my brother, but all my life I've pined for the artistic ability denied us at birth.

That evening, my father's olive skin, black hair and white teeth complemented the burgundy leisure suit and he looked

handsome, except for one tiny detail. As he crossed his feet on the ottoman, his clashing red socks stood out like a hillbilly in Beverly Hills.

Even I could recognize red was not suitable with burgundy. I wondered where those socks had been hiding before my father dressed.

“Dad, you’re going to have to change your socks.”

He pulled his eyes from “Bonanza” and said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” His normal even-tempered countenance reflected concern.

“Mom’s not going to let you leave this house wearing red socks with that suit,” I said. “Trust me on this.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

Couldn’t he see the horror of his selection? “Dad, the color combination is positively horrifying.”

“She’ll never notice.”

“Dad, I’m not kidding. You’ll send her into a faint if she sees those socks.”

“You sound just like your mother.” He remained entrenched in his easy chair, returning his attention to Pa and Little Joe.

I wouldn’t miss my mother’s theatrics when she spotted Dad’s unfortunate choice of foot apparel. I snuggled down onto the couch at the living room entrance to wait for the show.

“Steve, come in here,” I said to round out the family.

“I’m busy,” he called.

“Not too busy for this,” I answered.

Steve joined us and asked, “What is it?”

I nodded in Dad’s direction and waited for his reaction.

“Oh my gosh, Dad! Mom’s going to kill you when she sees those socks!”

“Such nonsense!” Dad said without looking up. “I’m trying to watch TV here. Your mother isn’t going to say anything.”

Steve’s eyebrows arched, then he looked over at me and grinned.

I patted the empty expanse of couch beside me and he plopped there, waiting for the fireworks.

Our mother swept into the room, clad in a beautiful silk dress. Her bouffant hair smelled of Chanel number five and hairspray. Her sea-green eyes sparkled, anticipating the rare evening out.

Steve and I held our breath and watched as her eyes turned to Dad.

Her smile evaporated as fast as a drop of water in the Sahara. Then she sucked all of the air from the room.

I was afraid she would pick up the bronze paperweight from the top of the bureau and throw it at him.

She sputtered, “Oh, Ed. What have you done?” Her pain from his breach of color etiquette was undeniable.

My father grunted and kept his eyes on “Bonanza.” He didn’t have the nerve to face her.

Steve and I giggled.

Mom turned to us. “Did you put him up to this?”

“No, Mom,” I said. “Dad gets to take all the credit for this.”

Mom scrutinized us. Eventually, she became convinced we had no part in this drama, other than as spectators.

“Where on earth did those socks come from?”

We shrugged. “They’re not ours.”

Mother looked from us, to the socks, and back to us again. “I laid out his shirt and suit before I took my bath. I never dreamed I’d have to pick his socks, too.”

I piped up to defend Dad. “I’m sure he didn’t do it on purpose, Mom.”

“He probably thought they actually matched,” Steve added with a half grin.

For once, my brother and I were on par with our mother.

Mom disappeared to retrieve a suitable pair of socks. I ran over to Dad and tugged on his socks, careful not to block his western while stripping him of the offensive items.

Dad mumbled, “I’ll bet Ben Cartwright never had to put up with such a fuss about the color of his socks.”

I nodded and bowed like Hop Sing, running away with the socks to throw in the large, metal trashcan out back.

On the KUAR radio show, *Tales from the South*, the author read this true story in front of a live audience. Temenos Publishing, Little Rock, AR., subsequently published the story in an anthology of the radio broadcasts in *Tales from the South 2*.

THE MAN WHO TALKED TO THE NORTH POLE

It was a week before Christmas, 1963. I was five years old, and pouted as I lay beneath the branches of my grandmother's Christmas tree. Earlier in the evening, my brother and cousins had declared I was "too little" to participate in the board game they congregated to play. Banished from their fun, I ran from the kitchen in tears. It was an Oscar-worthy performance, but that fact didn't bring me much comfort under the tree.

The piney aroma of the long, dark green boughs of the evergreen surrounded me. This scent, combined with the bright colors and rhythmic sound of the bubbling lights, brought me a bit of happiness.

"What are you doing down there, Ellen?" my uncle asked from behind his newspaper.

"Nothing," I replied in a glum tone.

After a moment, there was a shuffling sound as my uncle closed his newspaper. "Would you like to talk to the North Pole?"

"What did you say?"

"I asked you if you'd like to talk to the North Pole."

Crawling out from under the tree, I smiled at him. "Are you teasing me, Uncle Harold?"

“Why don’t you come here and see what you think.” He patted the leg of his slacks. Curly blonde hair ringed his smiling face and a dimple dotted his chin.

In an instant I was in his lap, anxious to see if he could actually deliver a private session with Santa.

“Are you sure you want to talk to Santa?”

“Oh, please Uncle Harold, more than anything.”

Answering my pleas, he reached into the pocket of his shirt and the magic began.

A high-pitched whine emanated from Uncle Harold’s pocket as he adjusted a button on the battery portion of his hearing aid. Connected to his ear by a long wire, the battery rested in his shirt pocket. Then he placed his right hand next to his earpiece and spoke.

“Calling Santa, come in Santa. North Pole? Can you hear me?”

The hearing aid wailed and squawked.

I brushed my hair off my shoulder with a quick fling, the excitement preventing me from being able to sit still. With effort, I forced my hands into my lap, but managed to wiggle my fingers while I waited.

“North Pole? I have someone here who’d like to get a message to Santa.”

With a flick of an eyebrow, Uncle Harold alerted me to Santa’s arrival. “Santa? How are things going up there?”

Uncle Harold listened to the reply and then told me the response. “He says he’s very busy. Well, that’s to be expected this time of year.”

I whispered a request. “Ask him about Rudolph, please.”

My uncle relayed my question to Santa while I closely watched his face as he listened with rapt attention to Santa’s response.

“Santa says Rudolph has been getting in shape for his big night,” Uncle Harold said. “He’s eating lots of carrots to build up his strength for his shiny nose and the long flight.”

I considered this information with great seriousness. No Christmas Eve trip could be made without Rudolph's shiny nose. Even at my tender age, I knew this was a big world. Rudolph and his team had to cover a lot of distance in one special night.

"The rest of the reindeer are doing well, too," Uncle Harold said.

"What about Santa?"

After a pause, Uncle Harold nodded his head and imparted the information. "He says Mrs. Clause is keeping him well fed so he'll be ready for the trip."

I clapped my hands in delight. "Have the elves made plenty of toys?"

Nodding his head as he listened to their reply, Uncle Harold said, "They still have many more toys to make, but they're on schedule."

My excitement could no longer be contained and a giggle burst from my lips.

Uncle Harold's expressive face "listened" to additional information from Santa. His forehead knitted with seriousness while his eyes sparkled.

"Santa is looking forward to delivering toys again this year. He says his list is longer than ever."

Never once did I see a glint of mockery in my uncle's eyes, nor feel any hint this was a game. I believed what was happening because he believed. The excitement of our transmission caused me to forget to breathe.

"Would you ask Santa to remember me on Christmas Eve? I'd like a Chatty Baby, if it wouldn't be too much to wish for."

Uncle Harold asked me, "What does she look like?"

"She's a little doll that talks! She wears a pink dress and her eyes close to take a nap."

After relaying my request, Uncle Harold paused as he listened to Santa's reply and then said, "I think he knows what you want."

I laughed out loud. That Santa sure was special. He knew everything.

Uncle Harold relayed a question from Santa. "He wants to know if you've been nice instead of naughty."

I immediately regretted my behavior from earlier in the evening. Santa clearly was not pleased with my crying and pouting session. "I could behave myself a whole lot better," I replied truthfully.

"Do you promise to try to be as good as you possibly can?" my Uncle queried.

"I promise," I said and held up my right hand as a sign of my oath.

With a grin, Uncle Harold said, "Santa, she's indicating her pledge that she will make your list of nice children before Christmas Eve."

He winked at me and nodded his head as he listened to Santa's response.

I heaved a sigh of relief, grateful for the chance to change my status with Santa and his elves.

"Good-bye, Santa. And tell the reindeer and the elves hello from both of us."

As Uncle Harold's hand dove into his shirt pocket once again and the squeal of the hearing aid was silenced, I wrapped my arms around him and gave him a hug and a kiss on his cheek.

"Uncle Harold, you're the best Uncle ever!"

Then I rested my head against his chest and he wrapped his arms around me. We remained there for a few minutes while the sound of his beating heart mixed with the rhythm of the lights that bubbled on the dark green branches of the Christmas tree.

The author taped this true story for airing on the KUAR radio show, *Tales from the South*. Temenos Publishing, Little Rock,

AR., subsequently published the story in an anthology of the radio broadcasts of *Tales from the South*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ellen Withers is an award winning fiction writer, freelance writer and retired insurance fraud investigator. Her professional writing career began in 2003, as a freelance contributor to the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*. She was editor of an international magazine, *SIU Today*, for insurance fraud investigators for ten years. She remains on their editorial committee. Ellen has written the monthly resident feature for *Life in Chenal Magazine* since 2006. Her non-fiction articles have been included in international, national and regional magazines. She's a contributing columnist to *Writers Monthly Magazine*, an online

guide for professional writers, on the subject of Writing for Contests.

Her publishing credits include sixteen fiction stories included in anthologies and two creative non-fiction stories featured on KUAR's radio show *Tales from the South*. One of her short stories garnered a nomination for the prestigious Pushcart Prize in the published short story category.

She serves as an officer of the Pioneer Branch of the National League of American Pen Women and as a board member of the Arkansas Writers Conference.

Ellen credits her success, in the world of writing, to the generosity and kindness of established writers who shared their expertise and nurtured her writing ambitions. She is most grateful for the mentoring provided by Dusty Richards, three time Western Writers of America Spur winner and Arkansas Writers Hall of Fame Honoree.

She is completing work on a cozy mystery set in a fictional town in Missouri, based on her picturesque hometown of Mexico, Missouri. Ellen is also developing a mystery involving the investigation of the disappearance of a man set in central Arkansas and working to complete a historical novel set in Northeast Texas.

When not writing or reading, Ellen enjoys spending time with her family, traveling the world with her adventurous friends and performing with Top of the Rock Chorus, a Sweet Adeline chorus located in central Arkansas.