

Some of the words

Grace Hols

Introduction

In writing class you hear: "Write what you know." You also hear that everyone has a story, or that every life is a story. But how do you narrow that down to specifics?

I have always enjoyed writing. Sometimes it was a matter of putting pen to paper and being surprised at what appeared. Other times there were characters who begged to be fleshed out and be permitted to engage in one or two of life's dilemmas or predicaments, so I wrote about them just to see what would happen. I wrote fiction, poetry, many newspaper articles. Mostly I wrote for myself, but the pieces I sent out began to appear in a variety of publications.

As I got older, the past became more interesting to me, and I wanted to explore that. I had written a local history book, but I was especially interested in my parents' stories. They had emigrated from Holland shortly after they were married, and it wasn't until I was away from them in terms of time and space that I appreciated what an extraordinary thing that was.

When I saw my parents and those of my friends begin to age and forget, we urged them to tell us more stories about their past, and to write on the backs of old photographs the names of people in them and what they were about. Sometimes that happened, but often the backs of photos remained blank. My siblings and I urged our mother to write about the "old days," which she did (reluctantly, because, she said, what was so special about her?) in a small scribbler. Then I took my laptop and sat with her as she read out loud, with me interjecting at frequent intervals, "I didn't know that, Mom. Tell me more!" and I would type madly as she answered, trying to capture each detail and implication. She provided the text and she picked out many photos, and it became a book for the whole family to enjoy.

Lately I have been writing about things in my own past. There are boxes of photos in my own closets, too, not to mention the hundreds, if not thousands, of digital images on my computer. I will leave the more recent coloured pictures for now, and am focussing on those taken many years ago. Somehow they are easier to write about.

Remember the saying “A picture is worth a thousand words”? Well, I have a lot of pictures: black and white, some already fading. So I am trying to write the words, or at least a few of them. This process involves an intimate study of a photo, to the point where I take a magnifying glass to zoom in and capture details otherwise overlooked. The result of all this is a growing collection of vignettes that I am calling “Some of the words.”

A road less travelled

It's hard to say what made me go.¹ Maybe it was the Christmas shortbread lying crisp and colourful on the cookie rack, its red centres bright and cheery, completed. Maybe it was the November sun that poured brilliantly through my kitchen window, taunting me as I scrubbed and polished, daring me to take my bike out of storage and join in on this mockery of winter.

Whatever it was, I went. My bicycle was dusty but the tires were good. In my white running shoes and my summer windbreaker, my face turned to the sun and my eyes streaming as the crisp air rushed by, I found myself pedaling down the road, euphoric as a truant school child.

It had rained heavily the night before. I had heard it pattering noisily on the fallen leaves outside the bedroom window and gurgling down the drainpipe. We wanted snow. It was getting close to Christmas and the children were eager to start skiing. The dirt road down which I now pedaled was muddy and slick, but all around me the hills and mountains were white with snow, as clean and powdery as the icing sugar I had just dusted on my Christmas baking.

I had no intention of going there, really. It was just a bike ride to take advantage of the rare weather. I didn't know I would go that way until I came to the fork in the road and that road was less travelled. There was less chance of traffic to rush by and splash me. So I turned off.

Biking past the ‘No Entrance, One Way’ sign, I found myself suddenly transported back to my childhood, for this was the farm on which I had grown up. My father had once owned this land. When I was old enough to go away to school, he had been a dairy farmer well on the way to success. But big business had arrived and had forced our family to move because the land was needed in the name of progress. Now my folks live in a house that is bigger and better and in a

¹This story was first printed in *Calvinist Contact* magazine (now *Christian Courier*) on December 2, 1988. Reprinted with permission.

prettier location, but their moving has always left an empty spot and unfinished dreams of what could have been.

It is tempting to romanticize the past. It wasn't easy. We had no electricity, no telephone, no running water. There never seemed to be enough time to get done the things that farming and the upbringing of six children required. But my sister loves to come here and gets very sentimental about what used to be. Maybe she sees it differently. She wasn't the oldest. She didn't have to break the way.

The tires of my five-speed made crunching sounds in the wet gravel, and a train moaned in the distance. Much of the land my father used to farm is now criss-crossed with railroad tracks, but the fields in between still look the same. I ducked under a red gate with cross-bars and followed a trail to the front of the field, by the river. The same hills and rises were still here. We used to hay this field. My brother and I sometimes did the raking, he on the two-wheeled rake he had to activate with a foot pedal, I on the tractor pulling him around the field, making windrows. I remember how one day one of the high wheels suddenly fell off the rake, and how hard my brother landed on the moulded metal seat, completely at an angle and holding on for dear life. I remember how we laughed about that.

We once had a church picnic in that corner field. I remember it as a child, the sun hot and burning on our skins, and the sudden appearance of ice cream in Dixie cups with wooden spoons for all the children a miracle. Those spoons, like miniature paddles, left a taste that reminded me of the smell of the woodbox next to the kitchen stove.

Turning towards the spot where the house once stood, I noticed a pick-up truck slowly emerging from the trees. It moved a few hundred yards and then stopped. I remembered that I had crossed a 'No Trespassing' sign and sank into a crouch, but the sudden wave of guilt that swept over me soon passed. I wasn't trespassing. For all intents and purposes, as they say, this land was still mine. All I wanted from it was to reap a memory or two, and to nurture some distant recollections I could gather later. Surely no one else was interested in my memories. I wasn't interested in taking anything else.



The old farm, ca. 1969. From the author's personal collection.

The house isn't there anymore. They burned it one day to make room for the railroads or whatever. I was home visiting the day they burned it, and my mother stood at the window of her new home, silently watching the columns of smoke rise into the air as she twisted her hands in her apron pocket. It was more than smoke she was seeing. Part of her past, a large part of it, was disappearing into the pale autumn sky. She said nothing, but stood motionless for a long time. Then she turned and offered me another cup of tea.

The detail of each room in that house is still clear to me. I remember the old hand pump in the middle of the kitchen counter, which gushed cool clear water in the summer and which was frozen solid for much of the winter. Then we would melt snow in an oval water tub on the stove, and, later, water would be brought in from the dairy in milk cans.

I remember the old McClary wood stove, now sought after as an antique item, but then a source of heat, a place to sit next to with a good book on winter evenings made long and lovely by the early darkness and the absence of radio or television. The stove had a black top that I had to scour and polish with lard or margarine to bring out the shine. That was one of my Saturday chores, after the ritual baking for Sunday coffee but before our evening baths.

Baths were a complicated affair, with the metal tub from the Old Country brought out of storage and filled with water from the tank in the stove. Each of us, in turn, suffered soap and shampoo to make us clean enough for church. The best part of the bath was the final rinse of clean, hot water which our mother poured from a long-handled aluminum saucepan.

The kitchen table was homemade and solid. It had to be, for we not only ate around it, it also served as a cutting block for the moose my father brought

home as a winter's supply of meat. My mother cut out fabric and sewed our clothes at that table, and after supper, to the hiss of a gasoline lamp, we did our homework there. We played games around that table, we squabbled around that table, and we prayed around that table.

The stove and the hand pump and that homemade, scarred table were in the kitchen where so much living took place.

The living room was through a curtained doorway, and it was there we gathered on Sundays, often with a visiting family. In winter the airtight heater glowed red on its sides, and the coffeepot percolated and often overflowed on top of it. Sunday was the day my father would grow uneasy in his easy chair, finding forced rest difficult to deal with. Soon he would pull his warm winter coat over his Sunday suit and stroll across his fields, assessing and planning but most of all loving the land for which he had crossed an ocean to develop and make his own.

As I crouched and relived some of my childhood, I was distracted by a blur of yellow that looked suspiciously like my sister's heavy winter sweater. I ducked instinctively into the tall, dead grass, and peeked over the top to see her standing motionless, hands folded behind her back.

Her face was too revealing, too open. I looked away quickly, but not before I had caught a glimpse of wistfulness and longing that reflected what I was feeling myself.

Why was it I could not go to meet her, could not jump up and say, "Hi, isn't this a great day for November? I've just finished some Christmas baking and I thought I would come here for a ride." I did not want her to see me here nursing my memories, tearing open hidden recesses of my mind to uncover feelings long buried there. I felt naked, loathe to admit even to myself that I, too, sometimes ached for the security of childhood. Nor, I suspected, would she want to be caught in her reverie. We were both trapped and isolated in webs of reflection, each with our own treasured memories of growing up.

So I, the mother of three almost grown children, hunkered down there in the damp November sunshine, waiting until her footsteps receded and were gone. Then slowly I stood up, brushed off the dirt and got back on my bicycle.

The sun didn't seem as bright on the way back. It seemed to me it had suddenly become colder, and the wind stung at my skin.

I was almost home when a truck came up behind me. It slowed and stopped, and I turned when my sister laughingly called out, "What do you think this is – summer?"

And I, feeling the brightness come back into my voice, called back, "Hi! Isn't this a great day for November? Why don't you come in for tea – I've just made some Christmas shortbread."

About the author

Grace (Seinen) Hols was born in Holland and came to Canada in 1949 with her parents when she was one. The family settled in Houston, located in the Bulkley Valley of north-central British Columbia, where a group of Dutch immigrants had grown in number since first arriving in 1938. Grace completed high school there, then left for Victoria, B.C., where she attended St. Joseph's School of Nursing. She worked as a registered nurse in pediatrics in Vancouver, and married John, also a Dutch immigrant. Ten years later, now with a husband and three young children, she returned to northern B.C. and her original Dutch immigrant community. With no hospital to work at, she began to write for the local newspaper, contributing features and community news. As well, she wrote local histories, short stories, poetry and non-fiction pieces, many of which appeared in a variety of publications. She is the author of *Marks of a century, a history of Houston, B.C., 1900-2000* (Houston, BC: District of Houston, 1999) which was published as a year 2000 project. She has won awards for her work, and, though officially retired, her interest in writing continues. She now lives in Smithers, still in the Bulkley Valley. Author contact: holfam1@gmail.com