

Memoir: “1950’s Long Beach”

By Janis Peterson

I am looking at one of those satellite maps: earth colors are so much deeper when seen from space. The ocean is a dark indigo blue; the greens move from bright chartreuse to forest green, the browns are mottled and changing, the mountain ridges grey-brown, sculptured clay.

Thin, fine lines, like cracks in delicate porcelain, cover the surface of the map. They are odd, and ugly: they mar the natural beauty, and they have no discernable pattern. Some are long; others are short. Some appear to be deep and wide, others very shallow. They look as if some angry psychotic had decided to ruin a beautiful painting.

With my index finger, I trace the line that runs right through my hometown, Long Beach, California. It’s a rather long line. I am surprised. It’s something that I never knew.

These are fault lines. The fault line in Long Beach is of a particular kind: strike-slip, it’s called. That’s because one part of the earth is slowly moving northward, while another part is slowly moving south. I look up the definition on a geologic website: a fault it says, is “when earth materials within bodies are subjected to forces, they tend to fail.”

I look at the long list of earthquakes for Southern California: I count 94, recorded since 1769, although the website tells me that the list is far from complete. The last major earthquake in Long Beach damaged \$50 million of property and killed 120 people; 70 of the 120 public schools were completely destroyed.

I wonder how much my father knew of all of this when our family settled in Long Beach in the mid 1949, just before I was born. My father, a structural engineer, came to Long Beach after the war, where he had worked on the Manhattan Project for the Department of Defense. His specialty was concrete. In Los Alamos they needed eight-foot thick concrete walls for working on the project. According to family lore, it was my father who figured out the mathematical equations to create those concrete walls. With his help, they were able to pull the walls up without having them crumble against their own weight. I can see him now, leaning into his drafting table, patiently writing equations on sheets and sheets of paper. We have pictures that show him wearing the dark

brown Army uniforms that were issued to these young recruits from the universities. He is tall, and slender, with dark black hair and glasses, and a full smile stretches across his face: confident, but not arrogant. My father was never arrogant.

But tracing the fault line with my finger, I find it strange how my father, of all people, would settle for a place where there was no guarantee his buildings would stand. And I can't help but speak of fault lines and families all in the same breath. The last major earthquake in Long Beach happened in 1933; our family earthquake happened in 1968, the year that I turned 19.

1968

This was the year that Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated: so was sixteen-year old Bobby Hutton of the Black Panthers. 1968 was the year that the TET offensive was launched, as well as the first manned mission Apollo mission. The year that students in France started a student revolution, and students in America took over Columbia University. The year that *Roman's Laugh In* debuted on NBC and *60 Minutes*, on CBS; the year that *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* begins. The year that protesters disrupted the Democratic Convention and Bobby Seale went to court in chains; the year the Beatles released their *White Album* and Johnny Cash recorded *Live in Folsom Prison*. The year Richard Nixon was elected president and the year Hubert Humphrey lost. The year that students were massacred in Tlateloco, in Mexico, and women and children and old men were massacred in My Lai in Vietnam. This is the year that Yale University admitted women for the first time; and the year that *2001: A Space Odyssey*, premiered.

Chapter 1: Long Beach, The Peninsula

It is a landscape of lines. The beach stretches taut against the coastline, while the sky, at the horizon's end, arches back in perfect geometry. The peninsula is a finger spit of sand thirty blocks long, culminating in the jetty--great, hulking chunks of fractured granite, that tumble out, at right angles, to meet the surf. Before they began dredging the sand from the bay to fill in the beach, and before they built the breakwater to curb the ocean's torrent, the waves would hiss and spit in long arcs over the boardwalk, spraying against the bay windows of the houses that hunkered down, against the wind and sea and sun.

The rumble, roar, crash, and hiss of the waves as they grab at the sand and recede — this is my lullaby at night. The ocean, though, is too close in my dreams. We are only four houses down from this powerful force that at any

moment can overtake us with its surges and excesses: the boardwalk, those old railroad ties that are gray and splintered, bumpy on our bicycle wheels, battered and beaten—they are nothing next to the power of the one big wave that I can see forming on the horizon, first a small bump, and then mounting, looming up larger and larger, until its spectacular crash on the sand.

I am enthralled and terrified, two emotions that become as entangled as the seaweed that stretches out each morning on the sand. As a young child of five, I play in the sand and water during the day; my nights are plagued with nightmares of my daytime memories of the sea's overwhelming power. When I am older, I dream of body surfing, of catching the perfect wave. I spend every summer and autumn in the ocean, treading water as I scan the horizon, looking for the telltale sign of a mounting wave. The waves come in sets. Most often, there is a lull in between the sets, and I stay out there, treading water, facing, the horizon, I look for the small mound that tells me a wave is starting to form. It's all about timing. With just the right pull of my arms and kick of my feet, I can get just in front of the oncoming wave and catch it; taking a deep breath, I will put my head down and ride the wave to the shore, the water pounding on my shoulders, the wave rumbling beneath my body. It is the most exhilarating feeling in the world.

If I am not so lucky, and my timing is not as good, I can fall beneath the crashing wave, and all of the unleashed power pushes me down to the bottom, crushing me into the sand, pinning me down, swirling in unleashed fury. It takes me years to learn to relax in this power, and know that eventually I will come to the surface as the wave's energy is spent, where it will take me gently to the shore.

When I am finally tired of swimming, I will take my last wave all the way into the shore, walking up to the sand that is warm and has been waiting for me, like a mother. Lying on my stomach, my elbows bent, my head propped up, I watch others swim. I can learn so much by watching them; marvel at their mastery.

The ocean is a fickle parent. You must study it well, know its moods: when is it serene, when it is playful, when is dangerous, when you can trust it, when you can't. We are taught, of course, from the time that we are little, to never trust it. This is hard to do. It is hard not to trust something that you love, that is part of your every waking moment, your playground, your playmate, your friend.

We are in the classroom, sitting quietly in our seats. The teachers are in the back of the room, their arms folded, waiting to swoop down on a misbehaving child. Today we have visitors. This is their annual visit. They stand in front, formal, polite. Their arms are thick with muscles that bulge from their short sleeves. They have brought their projector, and a movie. We are going to get our annual talk about THE DANGERS OF THE OCEAN AND THE BAY, AND WATER IN GENERAL.

As the projector slowly ticks away and the movie images flash on the screen, they talk. They are politely grim. This is the scene where a motorboat is slowly trolling the bay, back and forth. No children are swimming in the water; no adults sit on the sand. We watch as the scuba divers silently put on their masks and splash gently into the water. The lifeguards explain to us that the people in the motorboat and the scuba divers are trolling the bottom of the bay searching for a drowned body. We stare in fascination and horror to see if they find one. The boat goes slowly, up and down, mournfully.

They never show us the body. As they talk on, the message slowly sinks in: we will be this body if we don't listen to them. It will be our parents waiting anxiously on the dock for this horrible bad news. This is what will happen, they tell us, politely, if we swim without the supervision of an adult; or go too soon into the water after eating; or swim out too far, after a water toy that has slipped away.

As horrified as I am, I am skeptical. I don't swim in the bay: it's boring. I always swim in the ocean, because I want to practice the thrill of catching the waves. No one I know has water toys, anyway. Those are for babies and for people who don't live here.

And then the images shift to the ocean: I perk up. These pictures are different. People—adults and children—are standing next to the lifeguard station. The children are always crying; the adults' faces are contorted in pain. The camera pans to the back of their legs, near their ankles: everyone has this bloody puncture wound. It looks like a low-lying vampire has attacked them, and again, I am horrified and fascinated. The lifeguards are administering first aid.

These people, we are told, were attacked by stingrays. The stingrays love the warm water that comes from the PG & E plant in Seal Beach. They lie on the bottom of the sand, their beige color camouflaging their presence. When they

are stepped on, their tails, with their medieval spike, fling upward, sinking into the back of the flesh of the leg.

“Shuffle your feet,” the lifeguards admonish us. “Don’t take big steps! Follow a bigger person into the ocean!” The theory is, they explain, the bigger person will step on the stingray first, and there won’t be any stingrays left when you step into the ocean. I am safe, I reason, with six-year-old logic. I always follow my older sister into the water. She never knows why, but I always let her go first.

It wasn’t until I was thirteen that I actually had a friend who died in the ocean. Her catamaran, piloted by her father far out on the ocean, capsized late one afternoon; her father used the upside down pontoons to huddle in, to protect themselves, waiting to be rescued. But in the darkness of the night, in the vastness of the ocean, in the noise of the heavy motors of the Coast Guard cutters that plowed up and down through the waves, coming within yards of their boat, their rescuers could not see them or hear their shouts. They were found in the early hours of the morning, when the sun’s feeble rays sprayed out across the ocean: cradled in her father’s arms, my friend died of exposure. I remember her in the coffin, clothed in her favorite school dress; her blue lips, the sad sag of her mother’s face.

Tragedy—or the possibility of it—hovered over us.

Beach children. You can go to any beach in the world and recognize the kids that have grown up by the water. They are unencumbered by clothing, things. Their hair is sun-bleached; their feet are bare. Their skin is dry; they squint in the sun. They are confident, unafraid; they scamper everywhere, they seem to know everything. Long ago, they stopped listening to the adults’ rules, and started listening to the ocean.

There are four families close by with children my age and my sister’s age. There’s the McCallum sisters---Kate, Susie, and Carol, and much later, Patricia. Their brown-shingled house sits square on the boardwalk, facing the ocean. Big picture windows on the first and second stories face out onto the waves, the sun, the sand. The McCallum girls’ father is a doctor. They are husky, with big personalities, like their father. “They’re as strong as horses,” my mother tells us, because their father feeds them only beef and milk.” My mother is full of such epithets of wisdom. We go through the alley to get to their big backyard with the tall wooden gate that is latched. My sister and I are both a little timid. I guess our mother doesn’t feed us enough beef and milk. But I

marvel, when there's a storm alert and the surf's up: no lifeguards are on duty, and swimming is prohibited. My sister and I stand on the shore and watch the McCallum sisters plow through the waves, as if riding waves in a storm were as simple as breathing.

On the other side of the alley are the Harris twins, Billy and Bobby, and their older sister, Marsha, who is closer to my sister in age. Marsha and my sister play games that don't include me; my sister is always willing to go along with whatever she says. "We're going to play a new game," Marsha tells me. "We're going to test you, to see how smart you are." I want to be smart. They do long division on the chalkboard, and when I beg them to teach me, Marsha whispers to my sister. My sister turns to me. "You have to wait until the third grade to learn this," she tells me with great severity.

Now Marsha has a new game: I have become suspicious over time, but maybe, I think, they'll include me? I can see that she has used her doll dishes, and has all of these little cut up pieces of things, but she is too quick for me to get a good look. "You can't see what we're doing," says Marsha as she carefully places a cloth over my eyes. "We are going to put these in your mouth. We want to see if you can tell what each thing is. You can't touch anything." My sister is certain that I will cheat. "Close your eyes, even with the cloth over it," she admonishes. She tugs and tugs at the cloth to make certain that I really can't see anything. They are delighted with their game, I can tell. I don't really see the point. I am just hoping they don't feed me fried grasshoppers, which my mother did when her friends came over for a visit, wanting to share their country's delicacies with us. I am also hoping that there are no worms. If my sister doesn't trust me to cheat, I don't trust her to ever say no to anything that Marsha asks her to do.

Three houses down on the boardwalk are the Poplars. They have so many children, eight I think: I can't remember all of their names. The one that I do remember is Jerry. She becomes a famous female surfing champion. My sister is the local teacher: I am her faithful assistant. My sister loves teaching: she plays school every day. We teach Jerry her letters, then we teach her how to read; then we teach her how to skate and ride a bicycle. Watching my sister, I see how much fun this teaching is. We play it every day, trying to corral in the boys, who are immune to school play.

My mother is a teacher, too: she teaches anyone that she can to swim. We have learned from the time we were two. She takes us every week to the Pacific Coast Club where there is a pool. My sister and I wear our matching bathing

suits and swim caps. She stands in the water in the shallow end, teaching us to float on our backs and put our face in the water, then to do the crawl stroke. Her crowning glory is teaching us to dive off of the side of the pool in the deep end. I kneel down on my knees, shivering in the cold on the pool's edge, while she squats next to me, issuing instructions. My sister is on the other side. "Arms over your ears!" she says. "Now stretch them out straight! Put your hands together! Now lean over! Bend your head down slowly, and point to the water! She shows us each step. Now, slowly, fall in!" I want to gently fall in, but instead, I rather plop, which ends up being a belly flop on the surface of the water. It stings my stomach, and I come up, sputtering for air, frantically treading water. "That's better!" she says, trying to encourage me. I don't tell her about my stinging stomach. "Let's try it again! One more time!" She pulls me up out of the water, while my sister clammers back over the edge.

We live for the summertime. It's hard to wait all year long for the chance to have that unfettered freedom that summer provides: no rules, no classrooms, no responsibilities, or very few: we spend all day every day at the ocean, and there is no end to what we can do. We can ride our bikes on the boardwalk, and race through the quiet pairs of walkers who are taking a stroll; we can swim in the ocean when we get bored; we can play in the sand; we can go down to the jetty and watch the fisherman quietly baiting their hooks and casting out into the ocean. We can collect shells and sea urchins on the beach, and run the full length of the beach, playing tag with the waves; we can look for crabs that bury into the sand after the wave recedes—we can chase the seagulls and the terns and scatter them, flying. We can lie in the sand after swimming in the cold water, and slowly warm up, the sand and sun are like a warm, slow blanket, soothing, relaxing, and crooning us to sleep.

Summertime isn't just for the children: it's for the adults, too. In the early afternoon a group of mothers walk down the boardwalk in their black bathing suits, clutching their folding chairs---those wooden kind, with the cloth covers in faded striped patterns; they have their sodas, their cigarettes, their beach towels, and their cards. They climb over the boardwalk railing and plunk down on the sand, close to the boardwalk's edge, where there's less wind. Bobbie Poplar is fun: she's got a husky, smoker's laugh; she's strong, and opinionated, passionate. Ina Harris, Marsha's mother, is taller and slender, and cooler in her personality. Ginger, the McCallum's mother, is small, red-headed, quick: she darts around a lot like a bird.

They sit there and play for hours, day after day. Their skin is dark from the sun; their teeth are white, and they laugh a lot. They manage children's

demands from their chairs, never leaving: they are serious about their cards, and more serious about their fun. By the late afternoon, when the wind picks up and the waves are choppy and broken, they pack up their things and return home to their husbands and their kids: it's time to make daiquiris and dinner and settle in for the evening.

My mother is not a card player: it is not like her to relax and have fun for hours, and not worry about anything else. She is a swimmer: she goes with her friends every day to swim. They do this every summer for years. They put on their flowered bathing suits and walk down to the water's edge, right by the lifeguard stand, and plunge into the ocean. They swim straight out, past the waves, to the buoy, which bobs, like a beacon, about a half-mile out to sea. Once there, they swim around the buoy and head on back.

It's midnight in July. The grunion are running, and we are all---adults, children, infants---out on the beach waiting for them to come. The moon hangs, over-ripe with fullness, ready to drop from the sky; moonlight streams out onto the waves. We are spread out---the whole length of the beach---close to the water, clutching our buckets, waiting. There's a shout down the way, and then suddenly, the waves are thick with the grunion's silver bodies: their scales shine like sequins, and in the moonlight they are luminescent. We laugh and scream and shout, as they surf the waves to the ocean shore, where the females will lay their eggs, and the males will fertilize them. We wait until they have laid their eggs. We scamper in between the adults' legs and play tag and lose our parents in the darkness. Everywhere, the grunion are flopping around, trying to catch a wave to return to the sea. We scoup up the slimy, shivering bodies into our waiting buckets.

Our family doesn't collect the grunion. My father is an intellectual, he is not a sea person; we don't have a boat, and we don't go deep-sea fishing. My mother doesn't cook them for us, she says, because they don't taste very good. But Ginger has brought lots of buckets; we run in between the adults' legs, and we lose our parents and then look for them in the dark night.

Chapter Two: Sickness

I am four. We haven't moved to the beach yet: we live closer to the downtown area of Long Beach, on Freeman street. My mother is a part-time model. We model with her, sometimes, in American Red Cross fashion shows. My sister and I wear matching dresses that match my mother's, too. We all have parasols that we learn to hold at just the right angle. My mother

teaches us how to walk up and down the runway, and turn, and smile, and walk back again. We go to the dressing room to change our dresses, where my mother and her model friends are giggling and trying to put on their laytex girdles, which are heavy and thick. Someone farts, and they laugh even louder. Her friend Kay has a big dark mole by her mouth: she kind of looks like Kitty in Gunsmoke.

My mother's hair is in pin curls and she is sitting next to the black telephone; she cradles the phone to her ear, and she is crying. She cries a lot these days. My father is sick. There is no money. My father's business partner has taken the company money, bought a Cadillac and run off to Mexico with the barmaid from the bar across the street from their office. He has left a wife and five children behind. The wife is suing my father: she says he must have known of his partner's plans.

My father is devastated. His partner was the architect, who managed a pool of architects; he is the engineer, and is managing a pool of engineers. They are young and successful, and there are many jobs that are pending. There is a very big and important building in Saint Louis they are working on; they are working on eight public schools for the city of Torrance. There is no money to pay the workers to continue the work, and they have contracts that require they finish the job. His partner has disappeared to Mexico, and never returns.

My father can't walk. His feet and toes have swollen up, and he is in constant pain. The doctor doesn't know what it is: finally, he sends blood samples up to the lab in San Francisco. My father has contracted rheumatic fever, a complication of untreated strep throat.

My father is too sick to go to work. The company in Saint Louis flies out their main engineer, and for six months, from our house, the man and my father work on the plans together to complete the building. They spend all day working on the blue prints that are spread out on the dining room table: my father has his slide rule, his rulers, and his drafting pencils. The family eats in the kitchen, and we tiptoe around while they talk. My father takes breaks between the work, and when he is rested, they start up again. Finally, the schools, too, are completed. After six months, my father walks to work on crutches every day, and when he comes home from work, he slumps into the big rocking chair and cradling me in his lap, and we fall asleep together.

Finally, one by one, my father lets all of the workers go. He closes up the office and shuts the doors, looking for a place where he will work alone. He never works with a partner again; he never starts another large firm; he never hires a pool of engineers and architects.

It takes two years for the rheumatic fever to subside: we move to the ocean, which is better for my father, who suffers from so many allergies. The rheumatic fever, according to the doctor, has damaged my father's heart. He goes to bed at night, with his heart pounding in his chest: he is never sure if he will make it through the morning.

It is the crutches and the pin curls in my mother's hair that I remember; her crying in the phone; my father dragging his feet.

The crutches are put away; my father starts working again, all by himself, but the money problems never go away. It is the money that will hound my father, just as much as his faulty beating heart, for the rest of their marriage.

Chapter Three: Naples

We are moving again, this time to Naples. It's the second story bedroom I love the most: it's the biggest room in the house; the room that we four children all share. It faces the big, wide Colonnade street, the one street that used to be a canal. Now it's the widest street in Naples, with stately, colonial houses promenading on either side. The street arches wide, into a horseshoe: that's the grass park at the end, next to the canal, where we play baseball and hope that we don't hit the ball into the glass windows of the houses on either side. And at the end of the grass, there's the sidewalk that lines the canals that meander around, thoughtfully, in between the mainland and the two little islands that developers built in the late 1800's, as a way to attract new homeowners into this picturesque, just like Europe, life-style.

Our house is towards the other end of the street, closer to the main road, but from my window, I can see all the way down to the canal, and to the opening in the canal that leads to the bay, and beyond the bay, I imagine the beach on the other side.

I can run up the stone stairs—two at a time---to my bedroom to check on my forever wandering younger brother, to see in a flash if he has meandered on down to the canal---with its still, silent waters, lapping quietly against the

barnacled cement walls, that will cover quickly over him if he falls into the water. If he has, I can race back down the stairs and run for all I'm worth to head him off before he gets that far, and bring him back to the house.

Or I can lie in my bed under the open window, with the salty ocean breeze blowing on the curtains, a reminder of what I can't see, that lays just beyond the bay—the ocean; this is my new lullabye, the palm tree that rises up between our house and the neighbor's, the fronds softly slapping against the side of the house, the soft cooing of the pigeons that are nesting in the tree.

There's the piano at the end of the hallway, at the top of the wide, stone stairs, and my sister's cello. I am taking guitar lessons, now, something that my mother signed my brother up for, but he didn't want to go. I can run down to Gilmore Music in Naples, to meet the music teacher, all on my own: my mother's working in the day. Later on in high school, I'll rush home from school, carefully put on eyeliner and nylons, and walk slowly to the liquor store on the main street, to buy cigarettes at 27cents a pack and then smoke them in the little tiny backyard that we have and practically pass out: they're really too much for me.

What do I want to say about Naples?

I can't help thinking about all of the beauty around us; all of the coiffed lawns with manicured plants, the quiet canal water; the stillness and the unchanging houses that look stiff and formal whenever I walk by; my mother's friends who are wealthy, and who give us their daughters' hand me downs; we spend all summer taking in their clothes, and hemming them and starching them and getting them ready for September, when we start back to school. I walk up and down the streets, on long, solitary walks when I get older and am allowed to wander through the neighborhoods, and I just can't help thinking that we are leading someone else's life here in this little community; someone else's life that is on display on this big, wide street that never blinks, but keeps an always open eye.

I miss the battered old boardwalk, the raging sea, the wind that blows anyway that it chooses; the sea salt that dries and crusts on your skin until it stretches taut and hot in the sun. I miss the women who wear sun-beaten old bathing suits and laugh their husky smoker's laughs, and who don't give a damn about anything besides having fun. Where I can feel, and see and know that things change, are changing, and are being changed by forces greater and more powerful than me. And that all of it---the ebb and flow of the tides, the quiet

times and the rages of the seas, the mornings and the evenings, the late afternoons; that all of these differences I am part of; and they are part of me.

My sister and I go to the peninsula whenever we can. Before she is old enough to drive, we get life jackets for the boys and floats. We put the life jackets on them and put them on top of the floats, and swim the mile across the bay. We cross over from the bay, and then walk across Ocean Boulevard to the ocean side of the peninsula. We bring money to buy little lunch things at the local store; we spend all day at the beach with the boys, and then we swim home again in the late afternoon, dodging the sailboats on our way back, climbing up the dock, going in the back door to the shower, so we won't track sand all over the house, and feeling that wonderful, fulfilled, sun burnt, satisfied sense of the day. These are our summer times: back to the ocean, our home.

When my sister gets older and can drive, we take the convertible and go with our friends down the Pacific Coast Highway – Highway 1 – to Laguna Beach, to the Crescent Bay Cove to bodysurf in the waves. The water is crystal clear; the sand is a pristine white: the waves are huge, full, and they come crashing down on the shore with a fierceness that I love. The coves are full of hermit crabs and sea anemones and octopus, starfish and clams: I can spend hours scampering over the rocks; timing the waves that crash against them and fill up the tide pools, and then scamper back again: it's the ocean, full of life and things to explore, that I love.

My brother, Jon, is six: he is incorrigible. He has a sideways grin and shock of hair to match; long, lanky limbs, sun burnt skin, clear, clean cornflower blue eyes that come from Scandinavian stock thousands of years back; eyes that look out to horizons, that stretch out to oceans of corn and grain; that stretch out to cross the Atlantic ocean; and to end of the continent, and that end up in California. That kind of blue eyes. First born son for Jerome Leadholm Peterson; first born, after two girls.

My father is coming home from work: He's tired, the kind of tired that never goes away, but he's happy to see us. He's wearing his suit and his tie; he has his black briefcase and his black shoes.

My mom greets him at the door. "Look what Jon did; I was in the house cleaning, and Jon was outside playing, and I found all of these on the front porch." She has a handful of gas caps in her hand; there's a whole bag of them

on the floor. “I’ve gone to some of the cars, but I can’t figure out where they go.” Jon has done something that no one would ever think of doing: he has taken all of the gas caps off of all of the cars on the Colonnade. By my calculation (I’m trying to figure this out while my mother is talking), it’s at least 30 cars.

My father sighs. He glances at Jon, who is looking from one parent’s face to the other, calculating where the anger is going to be the worst. This is his daily task. It’s almost always my mother: she is much more explosive than my Dad. “Come on, bubber, (my dad’s nickname for Jon), let’s go.” My dad shuffles out of the front door, my brother trailing behind.

We’re all kind of embarrassed. We’re all hoping no one on the street will notice that they don’t have a gas cap on their car; that they don’t step outside and see my dad and my brother huddled over their car, pawing through the paper bag, trying on the different gas caps to see which one will fit. I sit out on the front porch and watch. Besides the upstairs bedroom window, that’s our little perch. A lot goes on, on that front porch. It takes them a long time. It’s almost nightfall when they finish. The dinner is waiting for them on the teakwood table. I’m nervous. What happens if they made a mistake and gave the person the wrong gas cap? Who’s going to find out? Will some neighbor come pounding on our door to complain about what Jon did? There’s always the possibility.

Huddled between all of the squashed down houses on the peninsula, sandwiched between the sea and the sand and the row of houses, we weren’t very visible. But here on the Colonnade, we’re front and center, as my dad likes to say: there’s nothing that escapes the eye.

My mother buys a convertible as a second car for the family. It stays with us the whole time on the Colonnade, although by the looks of the street, it doesn’t really fit in. It’s old; the black canvas top is faded; it’s a faded yellow, and it has smooth, tired wheels. It’s our beach car, our car for around the town errands and taking kids and friends everywhere.

When my dad comes home from work, the kids on the block –my brother’s friends--all run outside; he will give them a spin in the convertible, and they all scramble in, pushing and shoving for the front seat where my brother, privileged, perches. My dad laughs,” Okay, everybody, ready to go!” He revs

up the motor, looks behind his back to make sure everyone is in, and then off they go.

They don't go far. At the end of the block is the Naples Hotel, which is where the gondolas used to be launched from. Now there is a street there, The Toledo, and the roundabout in the middle, a small park with tall palm trees. My dad heads around the roundabout, down Toledo Lane, up and over the street and back around the roundabout one more time. The kids scream and shout. They love this. It takes ten minutes, maybe, but to them, it is the time of their lives.

Jon and his friend Allison, from across the street decide one day, when the hood is up, to sit on the top. The faded, sun bleached canvas doesn't hold them, and they plunge right through to the seat. No one is hurt, but my mom doesn't have the money to fix the hood, so it just stays down all year, rain or shine. My mother decides, shortly after the broken hood debacle, to paint the car black. Maybe she is feeling sorry for the canvas hood that she doesn't have the money to fix: I'm not sure. She also has itchy fingers for painting: My mother loves to paint: she paints everything---pictures, refinishing furniture. She uses cans of spray paint, which I am sure is all she can afford. She is an incredible painter for all other things, but in this venture, she fails. Our poor little convertible is a sad, drippy black now: the drips have congealed onto the body, and there they will stay.

The stories with this car just never stop. My mom is driving on the peninsula, where we used to live. She is driving the convertible, and she has on her bathing suit; she is doing her daily ritual, which is going with her friends to swim out to the buoy and back again. A policeman stops her for speeding. "May I see your driver's license, please?" There's a lot of Irish in my mom. It comes out at the appropriate times, depending upon your point of view. "You were speeding, miss; I caught you going 10 miles over the speed limit."

My mother is furious. She still cuts a good figure in a bathing suit: she thinks he's stopped her because that's all she has on. "Well, officer," she tells him, as she gets out of the car, "If you want my driver's license, you're going to have to catch me to get it." His jaw drops. She walks across the street, crosses over to the bay, and jumps into the water. My mother is an excellent swimmer; all she has to do is swim across the bay to the canal---it's less than a mile---climb up on the dock, and from there, walk down the street to our house. Then she can call all of her girlfriends on the telephone and giggle and brag about what an

atrocious and funny thing that she has done: someone will pick her up and take her to get her car. And that's just what she does.

In its later years, our little convertible decides to protest all of its mistreatment. For some mysterious, unknown reason, the horn starts to go off at four in the morning, at least three or four times a week. Because our bedroom faces the street, we are the first to hear it go off. It becomes like a second alarm clock. I wake up, put on my bathrobe, and knock on my parents' door. "Dad, Dad," I whisper. "It's the car; it's the horn again."

The bed groans as my dad gets up, and he comes out in his plaid flannel bathrobe, wrapping the belt around his waist, going to the kitchen to look for the screwdriver. He paws through the kitchen drawers until he finds it. He quietly opens the door, and shuffling in his slippers, screwdriver and flashlight in hand, he heads on out to the protesting car.

I am never quite sure what he does. He tinkers and pokes with the screwdriver; he pushes and pulls, and then finally, we are relieved. The horn has stopped. It's a one-time magic, though. Tomorrow morning, at 4:00 a.m., it will go off again.

Finally, by the time that I am a sophomore in high school, the kids in town are using our little convertible for joyrides. Maybe the kids who are stealing it are the same kids that my dad took on rides when they were little. We wake up in the morning, and it's gone. We find it in another alleyway down the street from the house. This begins to happen on a regular basis; we are always looking for our lost car the way you look for a lost dog. I jump into the Red Triumph that my mom has bought for me for \$500, so that I can pick up the boys and bring them home from school. I go through the alleyways, this way and that, seeing where it's been left. It's never very far away; we always find it.