

# Leas Lit

**ORIGINAL WRITING  
AND ART  
BY RESIDENTS  
OF MEDFORD LEAS**



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## **READERS CAN BE WRITERS!**

*If you enjoy reading **Leas Lit**, please consider contributing your own writing. Whether you have a short story, a memoir, a poem - or more than one - we want to hear from you.*

*In a few weeks formal solicitations for the next issue will be distributed. But it is not too soon to think right now about what you might want to write.*

*Remember, **Leas Lit** is for you and by you, the residents. Each time you read it, you're reading what your fellow-residents have written.*

**BE A WRITER  
AS WELL AS A READER!**

Anne Wood created illustrations for many issues of *Leas Lit* over the past 15 years. The *Leas Lit* staff remembers Anne with fondness. With her death we will miss her unique gifts and loving presence.

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## SKIN FLICKS

I'll probably never sit on a beach again but, if I do, I'll be swathed in veils and slick with SPF 40 sunscreen. It's too late, of course. My Celtic skin was well and truly damaged by midday, midsummer Florida sun when, as a teenaged girl, I lay prone all summer basted in the lethal mix of Johnson's Baby Oil and iodine, hoping to blend my generous supply of freckles into a glamorous tan. Damage from those heedless days is surfacing all the time and, on my frequent visits to the dermatologist, there's very little time spent in small talk or recrimination. It's all business. Serious business.

In another doctor's waiting room about twenty years ago, I was approached by an attractive young woman who gave me her card and explained that she was conducting a study on sun-damaged skin for the National Institute of Health. Would I be interested in helping her with her research? It would involve close range photographs of my entire, naked body and follow-up studies. There would be free skin care for me and my entire family for the next three years.

I did it, stretching while she held her camera inches from my body and snapped the shutter. She made unconscious little clicks with her tongue as she worked. They were not reassuring. She saw the rough patches that dot my skin which, in a classic case of adding insult to injury, the doctors referred to as senile skin. She saw spots that have melded into blotches over the years. Long ago, when those blemishes were smaller, on tighter skin, I took part in another nude photography session.

In the early nineteen-fifties, at a woman's college in the Northeast, freshmen were told to report for posture pictures. It was something that we had to do. No one complained, or sued, or even asked for a rationale. We met in the gym where we undressed. We were given sheets of paper the size of shirt cardboards to hold in front of our bare torsos while we waited. We were cold, with skin mottled blue and decorated with goose flesh, but we were docile. This predated the days of protests and students' rights and class action suits. We never questioned the clout of the school. They could do with us as they wished.

When it was finally my turn to step behind the canvas screens, I was told to put the paper aside, turn towards the camera, and then to turn to each side for profile shots. "No one will ever see these," they said.

Certainly, we never saw them. Some girls joked that they'd been sold to an academic pornography syndicate but the whole thing was such a matter-of-fact procedure that I had almost forgotten it until I read some years ago that the so-called posture pictures from every Ivy League college, both men's and women's, had been discovered in a basement room at the Smithsonian and had been destroyed. So, no record remains of that slender eighteen-year-old girl who stood, pretending nonchalance, stripped naked on a cold New England morning. No evidence remains that there was a time when visible knobby bones jutted forward at the front of each of my hips.

I haven't seen the result of the NIH study either, but my family and I were given the promised care. Dermatologists at the large, teaching hospitals in the cities



where my children live examined their skin every few months. During one of my routine screenings at the hospital near to me, they found an established skin cancer on my nose. Although it was removed in a Mohs procedure, the scar is still quite obvious. As I apply makeup, staring into the mirror, I catch myself thinking that it's nothing that a deep, rich suntan wouldn't conceal.

*Marcy Webster*

## AFTERMATH

*The Owl and the Pussycat,  
Edward Lear*

*The Owl and the Pussycat went to sea  
In a beautiful pea-green boat.  
They took some honey and plenty of money  
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.  
The owl looked up at the stars above  
While he sang to a small guitar,  
“Oh, lovely Pussy! Oh Pussy, my love,  
What a beautiful Pussy  
You are  
You are  
What a beautiful Pussy you are!”*

*Pussy said to the Owl, “You elegant fowl,  
How charmingly sweet you sing.  
Oh let us be married; too long have we tarried.  
But what shall we do for a ring?”  
They sailed away for a year and a day  
To the Land where the Bong-tree grows.  
And there in a Wood a Piggy-wig stood  
With a ring at the end of  
His nose  
His nose  
With a ring at the end of his nose.*

*“Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling  
Your ring?” Said the Piggy, “I will.”  
So they took it away and were married next day  
By the Turkey who lives on the hill.*

*They dined on mince and slices of quince,  
Which they ate with a runcible spoon.  
And hand in hand on the edge of the sand  
They danced by the light of  
The moon  
The moon.  
They danced by the light of the moon.*

\*\*\*\*\*

## Ten Years Later

Owl” called a querulous voice from the kitchen. Owl put down the morning paper and looked over the tops of his glasses as his wife entered the room waving a dish-towel.

“What?” he barked irritably.

“I thought you were going to help with cleaning up in the kitchen.”

“Pussy, I’m tired. I’ve been flying all night, and I just sat down.”

“Well, I’m tired too. It’s not easy getting the children up and dressed, breakfast for them, dinner for you and then get them out the door in time for school. I could use a little help.”

He sighed. “Look, we’ve been over all this before. You knew what was involved when we moved here.”

She came over and sat down next to him on the sofa. He tried to put a wing around her, but she moved away.

“It just seems like all the romance has gone out of our marriage. You never serenade me like you used to. I miss that!” she murmured.

“Well, it’s really hard to come up with a serenade when I had to sell the guitar when we first started the business and moved into this expensive condo at the same time,” he replied.

“I know,” she said. “It was a collector’s item because it was custom made, and you got a really good price for it.”

The owl responded gloomily, “I know I did, but I sure loved that guitar. Sometimes I think we should have sold the spoon instead.”

“Owl, I’m shocked! You know there’s no other run-cible spoon in the world!”

“What good does that do?” he asked. “We have to keep it in our safe deposit box all the time for fear someone will steal it.”

“We never should have mentioned it in our wedding announcement,” she said unhappily. “Do you remember all those antique dealers who drove us crazy for months trying to buy it?”

“Do I? Not to mention the Saudi prince who camped on our doorstep shouting, ‘Name your price! Name your price!’ for days on end.” We could have sold it for a wing and a paw and retired after that.”

“How can you say that? You know it’s been a family heirloom for generations. We couldn’t possibly part with it.”

Owl was about to reply, but thought better of it and lapsed into silence.

Pussy sighed. Owl thought sadly that she seemed to do that a lot lately. He hardly ever heard her purr any more.

“You know, Owl, I think it would be great if we went back to the Land where the Bong-tree grows for a second honeymoon,” she said wistfully.

Her husband replied, “I don’t know if the boat is even seaworthy any more, it’s so long since we have used it, and it’s been up in dry dock out in the elements so that it’s faded to a sickly chartreuse. You’d never know it was pea-green once. And you know that after Piggy-wig died a couple of years ago, they cut down the Wood and built a shopping mall there.”

Pussy burst into tears and ran out of the room. He could hear her mewling plaintively in the kitchen. Owl was debating with himself whether to follow her or not when she reappeared with a note clutched in her paw.

“Here’s another note from Mervyn’s teacher about him falling asleep in class all the time,” she said, handing it to him. “I told her he’s a night owl like his father, but she said he would have to adapt to a daytime routine if he wants to stay in school – which I doubt,” she added sarcastically. “He says he wants to go to work with you.”

“Well, that’s admirable, I’m sure, but he needs to get an education and grow up a little first. It’s not an easy business.” But Owl was flattered nonetheless. He was very proud of OWL and COMPANY, PURVEYORS OF ALL-NATURAL PROVENDER, DELIVERED

FRESH-KILLED, NO PRESERVATIVES, NO ADDITIVES.

“Put him to bed earlier, and make him stay in his room,” he advised.

“You think I haven’t tried that? But I can hear him flitting around in there half the night!”

“You know, Pussy, if we were still in the nest, he could go out for an evening stretch of the wings every night and get it out of his system.”

“Owl, you never get tired of raving about that nest! It was fine for a bachelor pad, and we managed all right when there were just two of us, but when the children came along, it was just too crowded. Besides, when Lily had so much trouble learning to fly, it just wasn’t safe!”

Owl retreated grumpily behind his newspaper. “Well, all I know is that things are tough. With all these new developments springing up, the crew has to go further and further afield to find game, so they’re putting in a lot of overtime, and that’s expensive. Used to be, we had plenty of money wrapped up in a five-pound note. Now, I’m lucky if I even get a wing tip on a five-pound note.”

Pussy retorted, “Oh, Owl, how you do exaggerate! But there may be some other possibilities. You know there are plenty of mice around here; I catch them myself all the time.”

“Mice,” Owl snorted. “Mice? What kind of market do you think there is for anything that small?”

Pussy responded thoughtfully, “Well, I’ve been thinking about that. I’ve been thinking that we might de-

velop a sideline for some of your higher-end restaurants.” She sat down next to him again.

Owl looked at her. “Like what?” he asked suspiciously.

“Well, you know how much you like my *souris à la sauce béarnaise*, and you’re absolutely crazy about my *quenelles des mulots*. We might offer them to those restaurants.”

“What makes you think they’d go for that stuff?” he asked. “And who would prepare all those things? That’s a lot of work!”

“I do know that ever since Vic Vulture went upscale with his Creative Carrion line, his stock has practically doubled. It’s been a huge success.”

“That’s true,” he admitted morosely. “But who’s going to cook all those things? And what makes you think anyone would buy them?”

Pussy moved closer to him on the sofa. “One thing about this condo that you’re always disparaging is that it has a really big kitchen, so there’s certainly room here to begin a small operation. Also, with the children in school all day I have more time to work in it. I’d only do a few items to begin with.”

Owl looked uncertain. “That’s a big departure from our present line,” he said. “I don’t know if anyone would go for it.”



“Owl, I think that your customers would be impressed by your ability to diversify. We could send out advance publicity to those certain restaurants and let them have a few items for free at first to see how they sell. You know how *you* enjoy those specialty dishes, and I would think that others might appreciate them as well. And I have a lot of other recipes that could be successful. If it doesn’t work, we don’t have to continue it. Mice aren’t a big investment, and we certainly don’t have to go far to catch them.”

Owl was thoughtful. “Well, if this is not going to require a big financial outlay up front,” he said. “I suppose we might give it a try.” But then he paused. “In case this thing does take off, we’ll need more staff, and that will be another expense, and maybe the kitchen here won’t be big enough.”

Pussy smiled. “See, you’re thinking about it positively already. You know, with your good business background, you’ll be able to solve those problems as they arise, and I will certainly be happy to help.”

Owl straightened up suddenly. “If this thing really takes off, will you expect to be a partner in the business?”

Pussy snuggled closer to him. “Oh, no, I wouldn’t even think about that – at least not at first,” she added in a small voice. She snuggled closer.

As Owl put a wing around her, he could feel her purring.

*Ruth Gage*



## BACCALAUREATE FOR SIGNORINA ZEETTI

I arrived in Perugia for the first time in March, 1955 to study Italian at the Università per Stranieri. Signor Neri, the genial factotum, suggested I stay at the pensione run by Signorina Amelia Zeetti, at Via Bruschi 3, which was behind and below the Rosetta Hotel. He phoned, learned there was a room and sent me on my way. Shortly, I was ringing the bell by the massive front door and almost immediately I saw her smiling face appear at a window on the fourth floor. She greeted me warmly and reeled down a small basket containing the key to the door. Shades of Neo-realismo! The basket served also to collect her mail, no small matter because she was born with a defective hip and limped badly.



Still she climbed those steps every morning when she did her food shopping, for she had no refrigerator. In winter she carried firewood up from the cellar; in summer during the weeks of drought, water from the nearby public fountain.

Signorina Zeetti was forty-four years old with rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes below her ample Umbrian forehead. The apartment was cold and dark, full of old, scarred furniture, difficult to clean but always spotless. Her fingers were red and swollen. There was no hot water in the apartment, only that which she heated sparingly on the two-burner propane stove. What a luxury it was to receive my allotment of water to wash and shave, about two quarts. In cold weather the hot water came from a small tank built into the old cast-iron, wood burning stove in the kitchen. There was only one toilet, the kind in which one's deposit is tumbled off its little dry ledge by a brief, violent flush of water. We had chamber pots in our bedrooms but I never used mine. Not out of finickiness; I did not want to inflict that little duty upon the Signorina. I preferred bravely to leave my warm bed and grope my way through the cold, dark apartment to the toilet, whose subsequent cascading flush probably wakened everybody in the building.

The other students in the pensione were Mario, from Foligno; Giorgio, from Imola; Gianni, from Greece; and Jorge, from Nicaragua. They were serious students enrolled at the Univerisità degli Studi, whereas I was at the Stranieri for my pleasure. Studying a language in the country where it is spoken is bliss.

In the evenings we sat at the kitchen table under a bare, weak bulb hanging from the ceiling. The table was

next to the wood stove, the only source of heat in the apartment. Sometimes, as she ironed our shirts with a heavy iron heated on the stovetop, Amelia would join our lively discussions. I was the first to call her by her Christian name, a mistake because among members of more stratified societies, familiarity breeds contempt. She also helped the other students study, reading aloud questions from their textbooks. After so many students, she knew some of the subject matter by heart. I suggested she take the university exams and earn a degree, a laurea. She laughed.

I learned many things in her house. Early on, when I said I was the only American in the house, she reminded me that Jorge was also an American. I learned frugality. Back home, years later, I prowled about my home turning off lights in unoccupied rooms. My family thought I was obsessive but I insisted, for whenever I pressed the light switch I thought of Perugia and it gave me pleasure.

This was Amelia's life for thirty years. Two hundred thirty-nine students passed through her door. She did more public good than ten senators. Eventually the cavernous old apartment was too much for her. She moved to a small apartment with central heat and with an extra bedroom for two guests. She began to accept only female students, of a certain age. In 1980 she made an exception for my teenage daughter, but she watched over her like a hawk. In 1982 she was able to retire.

She found a ground-floor apartment in San Sisto with a small garden where she grew flowers and a few vegetables. During the war years she had grown tomatoes in containers on the rooftop terrace of Via Bruschi

3, out of sight of the Germans. I loved that little terrace with its views over the tile-covered rooftops, the countryside falling away beyond the city limits and Assisi, a pale, pink rosette across the valley. Overhead exultant swallows. She had twelve happy years in that garden apartment. Then she fell and broke her hip. After hospital she entered a residence for the aged, L'Istituto Donini, where she spent the rest of her life.

I returned to Perugia to see her. L'Istituto Donini was frugal but humane. She spent part of the day in her wheelchair and part sitting up in bed. I visited her several days running. We spoke of old times, of her beloved students who still wrote and sometimes visited. She shared her ward with pathetic specters who roamed the hallways. One of them entered and spoke nonsense to us until an aide came to lead her away. Amelia spoke kindly to her. The nurses and the aides knew Amelia's worth well. When they entered with food or medicines or just to say hello, they greeted her with the same, "Ciao, tesoro."

On my last day we put on our best faces, bantered bravely and promised to keep in touch. As we spoke, she toyed with the edge of her bed sheet. When she saw my eyes drawn to her fingers, swollen, red and twisted by arthritis, she slipped them under the covers. At dusk I stood up to leave. I kissed her forehead and moved quickly to the door where I turned for a last look. Her eyes glistened in the semidarkness. I hoped she was thinking of her students and that it gave her pleasure.

*Charles Perrone*

## THE LETTERS – A LOVE STORY

They had worked through the hot July afternoon to clean out the storage locker. He had helped her pull out old suitcases, pictures that were in and out of their frames and silverware, some of them more than 50 years old. All of the things they had collected during the years of their marriage. His back ached and time had not been kind to his arms and legs, which were tired and cramped

The dust and mold mixed in with their sweat. Soon the floor in front of them was littered with bits and pieces of their life together. Through his dusty eyeglasses he caught sight of an old plastic bag filled with pictures and letters. The stamps and postal dates on the letters told him they were over half a century old. The photos were very faded, as faded as his memory of those people staring at him.

They finished their task of emptying the locker. She sat down next to him and ran a hand through her short gray hair. Her body was bent over with fatigue; she smiled and sighed, glad that this chore was over. Her brown eyes looked through her glasses at the faded pictures.

“They need to be sorted.” He nodded in agreement.

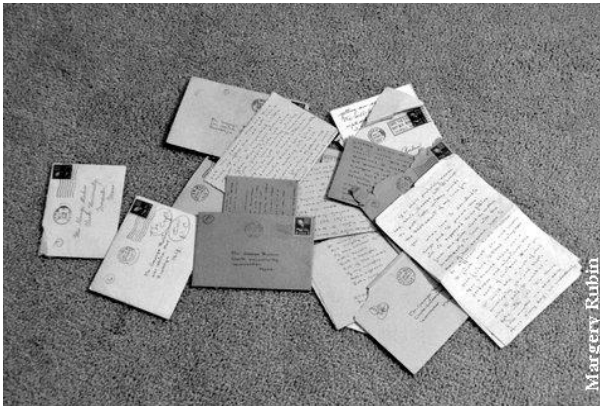
They locked the storage locker, taking the letters, pictures and some other things with them while discarding others. They drove home quietly. She commented, “Well at least we got something done today. We have the fans and the suitcases for our trip.”

Their apartment was warm and stuffy. He pulled

up the blinds and opened the windows. A soft cool breeze blew into the room and the afternoon sun reflected off their balcony. She had taken off the sweater she had been wearing.

“I’ll make us some tea.”

“That’ll be nice,” he replied.



He settled his tired body into his well-worn chair near the open window. After drinking their tea together they began to look at the contents of the plastic bag. She sat down on the floor and spilled the photos onto the carpet. He pulled out the letters. They were yellowed and one of the first he saw was in a blue envelope. He removed the letter. It began

*My dearest darling...*

\*\*\*\*\*

The weather was colder than usual for late September. Sid climbed the stairs easily and quickly to his dorm room. His roommate Russ was still in cartography lab. This gave Sid time to put away his own

papers and books. It was Friday and most classes were over for the week. He did not have a scheduled Saturday chemistry lab, so he could give his attention to a meeting of the student council, which planned the freshman hayride. Sid ate his dinner quickly in the dining hall and left early, not out of annoyance but with pleasure at getting away from the noise of the excited new freshmen.

The planned hayride, set for the following Saturday, was an annual event on campus. Sid sat down in the library next to two of the staff advisers. The meeting moved along smoothly. There would be three hay wagons with one member of the student council in each wagon. The rules included no liquor or smoking. He and the other council members were informed that all of the freshman students had been given copies of the rules. Sid sat back knowing he had very little to do but be a student supervisor in one of the wagons. His thoughts wandered to a paper he had to write and the possibility of going to a movie with Wally and Steve and then a beer or two at the Wagon Wheels tavern.

On the evening of the hayride the excited freshmen filled Charlotte Street, as the horse-drawn wagons arrived. The back gates of the wagons came down and the yelling, singing, laughing students climbed aboard. Sid watched as this jubilant bunch settled into the hay. They seemed so young to him, most just out of high school.

He, like many others on the campus, were ex-service men recently back from the war – all with so many memories locked tight inside. As he zipped up his old flight jacket, Sid knew he could never find those lost

years of his youth. He jumped up into the wagon, closed the back gate and settled into the hay. Looking around in the dim light at the faces in front of him, he noticed a young student sitting up near the front. Her blond hair fell easily down to her shoulders and her jeans were rolled up. Her eyes seemed focused on the young student she was with, and every now and then, when he spoke to her, her face broke into a slight smile. Sid closed his eyes and listened to the clop-clop of the horses' hoofs. Shortly the wagons arrived at the campground. The students spilled out of the wagons and soon bonfires were lit with music and singing filling the cold New England night air. Sid felt warmer now than when he started out.

A tired bunch of students filled the wagons for the return trip. The scene reminded him of returning to base after a long bombing mission. Sid closed his eyes and let time and place just drift. Crying and angry shouts awakened him from his reverie. The young blonde women student was trying to get up and away from her date. He was drunk and his hands were all over her. He tried to kiss her and pull her back down into the hay.

“Marty, get your hands off her right now!” Sid yelled as he stumbled over to them in the swaying wagon. Marty blubbered something incoherent. Sid took the girl by the hand and led her to his end of the wagon. She was shaking and scared.

“Stay seated here, he won't touch you anymore.”

Her tears had stopped.

“He wouldn't stop pawing me. He's been drinking ever since we left the campus.”



It was the first time he had heard her voice. It was deep and soft with a New England accent. Later, after the other students had disembarked at their dorms, he took her hand as he helped her off the wagon. He knew he wanted to see her again, but his own shyness held him back.

“Goodnight and don’t worry about Marty. The administration will hear from Student Council about his behavior. I’ll see you around, and do take care.”

He thought that his words sounded all wrong but that was all he could think of to say.

Sid was doing research in the college library for a psychology paper when she came in and sat down next to him. He could smell the freshness of her hair and skin.

“You know the dean of women spoke to me about appropriate behavior on campus. Do you know what they did to Marty?” she asked. Her blue-green eyes looked directly at him.

“The dean put him on probation. There’ll be a review at the end of the semester. He seemed okay when he asked me out for the hayride. I want to let you know I did have a drink with him in the wagon. I just never expected what happened...” she hesitated.

“Forget Marty. It’s your life here at school and your future that’s important,” Sid retorted. She continued to look at him, listening and absorbing every word.

“I have to ask you something,” she said. “Can we meet here in the library and work together on our courses? Oh, by the way, my name is Priscilla.” Without waiting for him to answer she got up, smiled and left.

What was he getting into, he wondered. Can I cope with her? Back from the war he knew of his own insecurities and fears. Knowing his needs – to catch up on all those lost years, to find his lost youth – could he reach out and help her?

Their days together in the library became a ritual. As winter settled over the campus, Sid looked forward to her arrival. He would watch her through the upstairs window as she approached, her blond hair blowing, her stride purposeful. The winter wind made her pull her coat tight around her body. Her hellos were warm and full of understanding of things unsaid. It was not much later that they would meet for dinner at a local restaurant on Main St., near the campus. It became a time and place to be alone together. Parting words were said on the porch of her dorm with long-held kisses. Both seemed afraid to let go and say goodnight. He loved the smell of her hair and skin and the feel of her breasts pressed against him. He would run his hands over her neck and along her face. Sid wanted her more fully than a goodnight kiss and she responded the same way. He said to her and himself, “I love you, and together I know we can meet any challenge ahead of us.”

“I love you too.” Priscilla responded, “Always.”

At the winter school break she had gone home to South Weymouth and Sid was back in New York staying at his parents’ apartment. He was lonely and felt very unsure about himself.

With the coming of spring the colors around the campus began to change. The school buildings seemed brighter and with the snow gone new buds were everywhere. On their first night together, when both had

returned to school, they had their first fight. She had dated an old boyfriend when she was home.

“You know it meant nothing, I was lonely. You are the only one I love, even more than my own life.”

She seemed very dramatic but her tears and her arms wrapped around him followed by kisses momentarily dispelled his unease. Again he asked himself, “Can I really change her, or is this just a romantic image I want to see: her beauty, the body I want close to me, her long family history tied to New England?”

Lingering on the dorm porch or on the grass behind Atwood Hall, on these spring evenings, they found their lovemaking hurried and frustrating. When he returned to his room, Sid thought about their future together and wondered how much control he had over it.

In May, just before the semester was coming to an end, Sid was called in to the dean’s office. It was a large Victorian room filled with fossils and geological remnants. The dean, tall, elderly, and bald, looked up from his desk. He pushed his eyeglasses into place and said, “I must tell you that the young lady student you have been seeing has been told that she will not be returning to the university in September. Priscilla and her family have been informed of the reasons for this decision. I have only to say to you, young man, not only are you a veteran but also a good student, with the possibility of a future in medicine ahead of you. I would suggest, Sidney, and I can only suggest, that you end this affair and stop seeing her.”

Sid left the dean’s office in a cold sweat. He ran all

the way to her dorm, feeling angry, ashamed, and stunned.

“I’m sorry to tell you that her mother came early this morning and took Priscilla home. She did leave a letter for you,” said the dorm mother as she handed him a blue envelope. He walked slowly back to his room, tore open the envelope and opened the letter.

*My dearest darling,*

*I don't even know where to begin. If Mrs. Hargest, our dorm mother, hasn't already spoken to you, she will have a talk with you. I was at the college today with my mother to talk with Dean Little. My appointment was at 10:30 and you were out to lunch when I got out. I don't think I would have wanted to see you after that conference, anyway. I was feeling pretty low and I haven't snapped out of it. Mother just got through drilling me for another two hours. Sid, I feel so confused, I've got to talk to you. I'm not sure of anything anymore, except that I need you. I know you just can't drop your books and come running to me. I know I must be rotten to the core to have them say those things about me. I thought maybe I was growing up but I guess I was wrong. Maybe I was wrong about college – I don't know. I'm at the bottom of my rope and I feel like taking an overdose of sleeping pills. I know this letter sounds silly and stupid but I need to talk to you so very much! It's important. If I have to go on loving you while working in some office, I'll do it. No one can make our love die. Goodnight my darling. Pris.*

*P.S. You can write or call me at my girlfriend's house in Little Nahant.*

Sid read the letter over and over. He couldn't decide on his next step. What should he do? How had he failed her? He reacted by doing almost nothing. Yes! He

would call and write, but even that didn't seem enough. He always guarded his own emotions. He had learned that whatever you feel, keep it locked tight inside.

Summer school sessions started. Sid did not go home but stayed on the campus. The dorms were mostly empty of students. He walked each day to class and ate meals in a local Italian restaurant. He waited each day for the mail and her letters. They made plans to meet in Nahant, where Pris had friends. She cried constantly on the phone. Sid found himself boosting her ego and self-esteem and at the same time trying to make sense of the events that had unfolded. Priscilla's mother and father wrote to him and asked him to come for a visit for they were finding it very hard to cope with her. Sid felt that for Pris and her family this experience, "kicked out of college," was heart wrenching.

After almost a month apart they had their first weekend together at her home. She seemed to him more beautiful but sadder and lonelier. He could sense her family's disappointment with her, though nothing was said. He could only guess at the reasons for her expulsion. Only her grandmother seemed to understand both of them and supported their love for each other.

Sid didn't have any solutions except to try and forget the past. They swam every day. He would carry her on his shoulders into the cool water. Her deep tan contrasted with her blond hair. They stayed close all weekend, as if each were protecting the other from the outside world. A letter arrived at school when Sid returned after the weekend.

*My Darling,*

*I wish we could spend all our time here in my New England. At least we wouldn't be at college with a thousand eyes watching us. It's strange when two people are in love as much as we are, so many want to break us apart. I can't get the conference at the university out of my mind. I know I must make some decisions. I'm leaving next week to visit with relatives in North Carolina. I hate being so far away. I need you more than ever, you always give me courage to hang on.*

*Always.*

There were lonely letters one after another. Always with the same theme.

*We both have tried to compromise with each other's moods...*

*I'm selfish enough to want to keep your love...*

*I forget at times that you can't take love for granted...*

Sid would call her on the phone after each letter. He tried to express his own love for her but all he had was the cold black mouthpiece of the phone.

After summer school her letters followed him home.

*My Dearest,*

*I need to see you and talk to you. I'm coming to New York after I return from North Carolina.*

He met her at Penn Station. She looked tired.

“It's a long trip from Boston and Dad is not well.”  
Pris said.

They went to a local luncheonette for privacy and a place to talk. Sitting opposite each other in a booth he held her hands. Pris looked directly at him as she had always done and brushed her hair back from her face.

“I’ve spoken to my aunt in North Carolina and I’m going to take a job down there.” she said.

“Must you go so far away?”

“I need to find myself. I also need to get away from my parents. They’ve been on my back ever since I had to leave school.”

“I know all about it. I received a letter from your grandmother and she’s on our side.”

“Sid, I love you so much and I’m still not sure that this is the right thing.” Her eyes seemed to question him.

As he looked at her he had no answer. Why was he afraid to commit himself and say, “Please stay, I love you, let’s find a solution so that we’ll have the rest of our lives together”? Would that mean taking on more than he could handle. All he could say was, “I know.”

At the train station he held her very close and they kissed goodbye. As he let her go he felt that this would be their last time together. Sid returned home knowing deep inside that something was ending. That the breakup could have been his fault was too painful to contemplate. Pris had touched him in a way that no one ever had before. She’d made him feel important and needed. But he knew that part of him had held back and could not respond with a total commitment and possibly never would.

Maybe in different ways they both needed to grow up.

Her letters from North Carolina were filled with words but said nothing.

*The weather is hot and the job in the warehouse is boring...*

In September he returned to the campus. The dorm was noisy with the new incoming freshman class. Her letters had stopped coming. He had only her photo over his desk to remember the time something important had happened in their lives. Then a letter arrived from Boston.

*I want you to know that Hugh and I are engaged to be married. He is a good friend of my brother. We are planning a spring wedding. I do wish you the best at school.*

Sid folded the letter and put it back in the blue envelope. She had made a decision for both of them.

\*\*\*\*\*

About fourteen years went by before Sid saw Pris for the last time. He and his wife Mary were visiting Cape Cod. They had met after college and they married when he started medical school. It was his suggestion to drive down to North Marshfield and pay Pris a visit. Mary didn't object. Pris was sitting on the porch of her house, while her two children played in the yard.

"I'm sorry Hugh isn't here, but he had to put in overtime at the factory."

She offered them a drink and they sipped a cool gin and tonic. She looked tired; her blond hair was cut short and pulled back behind her ears. Her eyes had dark rings under them but that blue-green brightness was still there. Her smile had disappeared. They sat on the porch and chatted about their families, and when it was time to go a kiss on the cheek sufficed as a goodbye. Sid did not look back as they drove away, but he sensed that she was watching them from the porch.



That winter he sent her a Christmas card. It came back a few weeks later, stamped: RECIPIENT MOVED – NO FORWARDING ADDRESS.

\*\*\*\*\*

He rose from the floor, his back and legs aching from sitting so long in the same position. He put the letters back in their blue envelopes and slowly walked into the living room. His wife was still sorting the pictures.

“We need to go through these and put them in albums,” she said.

“It’s a good idea for a cold winter night when we have nothing else to do,” he replied.

He bent over where she was sitting and kissed her.

“What’s that all about?” she asked.

He smiled to himself but didn’t answer. Instead, he walked over to the window and looked out at the last long slanting rays of the sun as they touched the buildings and made them glow in the fading light.

*George Rubin*

## A EUROPEAN EDUCATION

The best fare to Naples in '55  
Was the Roma of the Lauro Line:  
A hundred fifty dollars bread and vino  
A cabin shared with two men from Montclair.  
I chose a one-way ticket, a gesture  
Like stout Cortez who burned his ships at  
Veracruz.

We departed in a raw springtime blow  
And were battered by heavy, angry seas.  
Casualties were light: a broken arm, not mine  
Glassware, china, some ill-digested meals  
Forgotten when the Azores hove in view  
Glistening, a floating forest wrapped in rain  
Accessible only to oared lighters  
Which danced out to meet our swaying ship  
And madly bobbing, collected cargo.  
Ragged seamen performed routinely  
Miracles arcane to us who lined the rail,  
Hand and eye evoking skills inherent  
To heroes on Homer's wine-dark sea.

*Charles Perrone*

## OVERLAND STATION, MARYSVILLE, KANSAS, SUMMER, 1860

*Based on a true family story*

She sat motionless, the other passengers having long since stepped down from the stagecoach. Though she was motionless she continued rocking on the inside and her ears still rang with the long-stopped sounds of the stage. Being a long time on the road, she thought she had become used to the rough ride. But her body could not forget the mile after mile on an ocean of sound – of the horses, the creaking of the leather, the occasional yell of the drivers – and the constant jolting of the coach. Was she relieved or mystified by the silence? Under all the emotional struggle she was sure of two things, her physical exhaustion and the unpleasant knowledge of being unwashed.

She stepped down from the door of the coach onto the top step. She stood for a moment wondering where she was, nor could she tell the time of day, the clouds having settled in from the west. Was it time for the noonday meal or supper and a night of rest? A hand came towards her from the bottom of the steps.

“Emma Spaulding? Miss Spaulding?”

“Thank you,” she took the hand and stepped down on the ground. “I’m Emma Spaulding.”

“I’m George Evans, the proprietor of this station. Welcome to Marysville. Mrs. Evans is inside. Allow me to introduce you.”

“I would like that.”

“John,” Mr. Evans called to one of the boys standing in the yard, “take Miss Spaulding’s trunk and burlap into the house and put it where Mrs. Evans instructs you.”

Emma followed George Evans across the yard. She was led into the central hall of the station house and then into a small room at the back of the house next to the kitchen. Her trunk and bag were already near a single daybed. Presently, a woman appeared.

“Miss Spaulding, this is my wife, Margaret Evans. She’ll take care of you from here. I must get back to work.” He left Margaret and Emma alone.

“Please call me Emma. Miss Spaulding sounds so formal this far from Baltimore.”

“Then, let’s be on a first name basis. I’m Margaret.”

“Thank you, Margaret.” Emma voice was almost a whisper. “I traveled by rail car to St. Louis and stage-coach to Marysville, stopping every twenty or so miles for a fresh team of horses. I’m exhausted from the effort.”

“If you don’t mind my saying, I agree. You look perfectly worn out. I’ll have Molly bring some hot water so you can freshen up. Supper will be served in about an hour. Excuse me while I attend to the work in the kitchen. We’ll talk later, after you’ve had something to eat.”

Emma sat on the daybed and looked around the small room. There was a massive desk along the wall opposite the bed. A cabinet containing account books and stacks of documents stood next to the desk. At the

foot of the bed was a washstand. To her right was a window looking over what Emma took to be the stable yard. She forgot where she was. Her vision was lost in the wide expanse of prairie. After what seemed a long time she forced herself to focus on the room. The wall behind the desk was hung with framed lithographs of landscapes and a color-washed picture of a stagecoach in motion, drawn by a mighty team of horses. This was obviously Mr. Evans' office.

She was startled by a soft knock at the door. Without bidding, a young girl came in carrying a large pitcher. A towel was draped neatly over her left arm.

“Scuse, mam, I’m Molly.” The girl spoke cheerfully in an Irish brogue. “Miss Evans says there’s no rush. I’ll fetch and clean up before I bring your supper.” With that Molly placed the pitcher and towel on the washstand. Just as she had quickly entered she left Emma alone.

Emma washed as best she could and changed her shirtwaist and skirt. She so wanted this traveling to be done with. The exhaustion and constant dirt of the road caused her to waver. Would she ever be in her own home? When she had finished dressing she thought some fresh air might help to clear her mind.

She found her way through the busy house. What in her exhaustion she failed to see on her arrival, she now discovered in a landscape so different, she could barely believe her senses. What was barren in her exhaustion was now alive with people – men driving teams of horses with wagons loaded with goods, men on horses, women tending kitchen gardens, small barefoot children playing games in the summer heat. There were

animals everywhere: horses of course, mules, ponies, dogs, cats, cows, chickens and geese. In all its bustling activity this small village was a veritable communal farm-yard. She observed but she seemed not to be noticed.

She walked a few hundred yards down the main street, past at least a dozen houses. She found a quiet lane which wound its way around the “town” through a grove of trees. A few yards within the grove she stood for a moment. The air was fresh here. It made her feel clean and calm. The lane brought her back to two large barns and the large stable. She recognized the yard she had seen earlier from the window. Emma made her way to the front door of the station house.

Molly was waiting at the door to Mr. Evans’ office. While Emma was gone, Molly had removed the pitcher and washbasin. She had placed a small table in the center of the room.

“Supper is ready,” Molly said. “I’ll bring it right in.”

Enjoying the hot food, Emma’s mind was able, for the first time, to formulate into words the questions she had had from the moment she stepped from the stagecoach. Why was she being treated this way, with such kindness? Why was she given a room to herself? Was she meant to sleep alone in a comfortable bed? Why? She had not asked for any of this. She had been traveling for nearly a month. In all that time Emma had not met such kindness.

“Emma?” Margaret stood at the office door. She entered the room. “I hope the food was satisfactory. We eat rather simply here.”

“Oh, Margaret, thank you so much. The food was delicious. It was the best meal I’ve had since I left Baltimore.”

“Then you have traveled a long, tiring distance. Mr. Evans and I came from Ohio last year. It certainly was not the distance you have endured. We took over this station when the settlers of Marysville, Frank and Mary Marshall – the town was named after Mary – moved west to Colorado. It’s hard work but we enjoy it.”

“I have so many questions,” Emma found herself gazing out of the window, feeling lost.

“I understand. May I tell you a story? I may be able to answer at least some of your questions. A man on horseback – we see hundreds of men riding through here on horseback – this was an unusual gentleman. He stopped for a few hours. He said his name was Thomas Pancoast and that he was returning to Placerville, California. He said we should keep a watch for a young woman traveling alone by coach, an Emma Spaulding from Baltimore...”

“Margaret, say no more. I should have known. Yet, this is a surprise to me.”

“Mr. Pancoast must think a lot of you. He provided so that you should have a comfortable stay with us. We are delighted to do this for you, and for Mr. Pancoast.”

“You see, Thomas and I are to be married.”

“I thought that might be the case. It is unusual for a young woman to travel alone all this distance.”  
Marga-



ret drew nearer. "I have a suggestion. The express pony will be coming through Marysville in about an hour. Why don't you write to Mr. Pancoast. I'm sure he would be glad to know you are safe and on your way."

"Thank you. Your kindness is overwhelming. I shall be eternally grateful for what you have done."

"There is paper, pen and ink on the desk. I'll send Molly in a little while and she will make sure the express gets your letter. Now I must get back to the other travelers." Margaret turned at the door. "I'll send Molly to wake you in the morning. Sleep well. Good night."

Left alone, Emma sat at the desk and wrote –

*My dearest Thomas*

*Today I stopped here at the station called Marysville in Kansas I am being well taken care of for which I am most thankful especially for your thoughtfulness and planning*



*Mr & Mrs Evans the proprietors have made me feel quite  
at home I have a small room alone for the night a luxury  
thanks to you The pony rider is coming thru here shortly I  
wanted to get this to you to tell you I am well and look forward to  
being with you in California*

*I send all my love Emma*

Thomas and Emma were married in September  
1860 at Placerville, California.

*Chris Darlington*

Softly, at woods' edge  
dusk unfolds as two great owls  
echo and echo.

*Elizabeth Hicks*



## FIRST TASTE

I was a 17-year-old immigrant attending Food Trades Vocational High School in downtown Manhattan. The school's purpose was to teach students the basics of the food industry. Having been separated from my parents, I was living at that time in a boys' home across town from the school. In the course of my attendance at the school, I became friends with Mary W., a tall, slim girl with curly blond hair, blue eyes, and a friendly smile. Every school day she took the Long Island Railroad train from her home in Amityville, Long Island, to Pennsylvania Station, and from there a bus to school. Sometimes she walked those 22 blocks, especially on her way home, and I often accompanied her. I could not understand why she spent so much time to get to the school when she could have more leisure time at home. She told me it was her choice.

After our classes were over, both of us often went to the office of Ms. C., the home-economics teacher, to help with such tasks as filing and other office work. Ms. C. was a tall lady of about thirty years with reddish-brown hair cut short and thick horn-rimmed glasses. She was in charge of all food preparation. In the friendly atmosphere of her office the three of us talked about various subjects. Somehow one day the conversation veered to oysters. I confessed I had never eaten an oyster, nor even seen one. I explained that in the part of Bavaria I came from, oysters were extremely expensive and only the very affluent could afford them. The oceans were far away, and oysters would have to be packed in ice and shipped expeditiously to our region, a process

that was very expensive and fraught with the possibility of spoilage. I thought it odd that Mary wore a mysterious smile while we were discussing oysters. During our walk to the train station on this occasion she kept on chuckling, not telling me what was so amusing. I walked back home, trying to figure out what was going on.

It started to fall into place a few days later when Mary asked me which Sunday I would be free. Later that week she invited me to her house for Sunday dinner. Her mother would do all the cooking. With appreciation in my voice, I accepted the invitation. Mary told me she would meet me at the station in Amityville and take me to her home. I enjoyed the train ride, both underground and over the bridge into Long Island proper. The landscape was rural but with many housing developments. The green of the area soothed my eyes. When I arrived in Amityville, Mary was there, looking very pretty in a green dress with a yellow flowery pattern and a yellow belt. Standing at her side, wearing chino pants and a sport shirt, was her older brother Bob, with brown curly hair, brown eyes, and what I thought was a mischievous mouth. He drove us in an old Ford station wagon to their house, where their mother welcomed me. Looking at Mrs. W., one could tell immediately from whom Mary got her good looks, as she had the same blond hair and the same smile. Mrs. W. wore a print apron over a colored dress. She seemed to enjoy the flowers I brought. I met Mr. W., who was both a minister and a postal employee. He was tall with a stocky body, thinning dark brown hair, a generous mouth, and deep-set green eyes. They took me to the living room, where Mr. W. inquired into my background. Then Mrs. W. announced that the dinner she had made consisted entirely of oyster

products for the purpose of introducing me to that delicacy. I was embarrassed and apprehensive. Suppose I did not like the oyster cuisine? What was I going to do? Well, I decided to do the best I could do and try to enjoy the meal. The five of us and Mary's two sisters trooped into the dining room and sat down around an oblong oaken table which was covered with a lace tablecloth. We joined hands and Mr. W. offered a prayer of thanks including a short welcome to me.

I knew oysters came in shells, but I had never seen one. Mary's mother brought in the first course, oysters on the half-shell. I looked at the plate in front of me and thought, what an ugly food. I was confronted by gray lumps swimming in a gray liquid on top of rough-looking flat containers. How could I eat this? But since I was learning the food business and this was part of it, I needed to at least try to eat them. Mrs. W. showed me how to add drops of lemon juice and Worcestershire sauce and then use the tiny oyster forks to pick up the mollusks and convey them into my mouth. The flesh felt slippery and chewed like soft rubber, but the flavor was outstanding, slightly nutty, slightly salty, and metallic. I thoroughly enjoyed this new experience. Ball-shaped, salty dry crackers were served with the oysters.

Everyone was happy with the results of the taste test. Then soup plates were provided. Mrs. W. brought in a yellow china soup tureen full of oyster stew. This time the oysters were served hot in a creamy sauce with specks of chopped parsley on top. The consistency of the oysters had firmed. Although the flavor was muted, it was also strongly reminiscent of the ocean. I greatly appreciated this dish.

The soup plates were removed and fried oysters were presented together with coleslaw, French-fried potatoes, and cocktail sauce. The oysters looked spectacular in their crusty coating. The crunchy flavor filled my mouth; their beautiful tangy taste was stronger than in the previous dishes. It was simply delicious.

Now I was full of oysters, having thoroughly enjoyed the three different preparations. But this was not the end. For dessert, Mary's mother brought out a homemade apple pie. This was a heavenly ending for a spectacular meal. I expressed effusive thanks to Mary's mother and the rest of the family. When it was time, Bob drove me to the train station for my journey back to the boys' home. Mary stayed back to help with the dishes. I have loved oysters ever since.

*Stefan Frank*

## DEPARTURES AND ARRIVALS

**D**epartures and arrivals are very different things. For example, one may depart for, or return from, vacation; one leaves or comes home from school. Mine were of a very different category.

My first memorable trip was in March 1939 when tumultuous events necessitated my departure from Czechoslovakia, all alone, by train and then by boat to the English Channel.

I remember clearly the passengers in my compartment. There was a famous ice hockey player with his wife. He was of Slovak origin returning home to Canada. There was a businessman returning to Belgium, and a man in a Nazi uniform with a glued-on swastika on his chest. He had traveled from Germany.

The last thing I remember of that departure is the view from my train window – all of my family, each waving big white handkerchiefs, saying adieu. I never saw any of them again.

Years later I was to return to Czechoslovakia, having departed from England by ship in March 1945 as part of a convoy. It was exactly six years after my arrival in that country.

Our destination was Czechoslovakia. We arrived in stages about two weeks after the end of the war in Europe. I recall that I perceived Prague as a very small city in comparison to the immensity of London.

Political events were not developing advantageously in Europe. In September 1947, I obtained a position in

the Czechoslovak embassy in London. It was a great stroke of good luck. In February 1948, only five months after my arrival in England, the Communist coup took place in my homeland and I was forced to quit the embassy.

I petitioned the British government for political asylum and it was granted. Eventually, I became a naturalized citizen of Great Britain. However, during this process I could not travel. The “departures and arrivals” in my life were temporarily on hold.

The next unforgettable journey took place in February 1955, when I traveled via the Holland-America line from Southampton, England, to New York. My arrival in New York was not as exciting as I had hoped. We arrived in port at 4 a.m. I, like everyone else, rushed up on deck to see the tallest building, the Empire State. Unfortunately, on that morning there was heavy fog that completely cut off all the top portion of this famous building.

My idea was to stay for six months. It became a bit prolonged because I am still here [2005] and I am about to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of my arrival in the US!

Unforgettable.

*Hana Stranska*

*Editor's note: This essay was written in French and read at Le Cercle Français in 2005 by the late Hana Stranska. Many residents remember Hana with great affection. Our assignment was to write about “unforgettable” experiences and she chose “departures and arrivals.” Hers were different, but then, under the shadow of*



*WWII, everything was different. Thanks to resident Marty Istvan for translating this story, which I found recently among my own files.*

*Carol Suplee*



*Hana Stranska in 2012*

## THE BIG BANG

### How Our Planet Came into Being

Once upon a time long, long (eons) ago, on a planet far, far (light years) away, people lived happily and welcomed Santa Claus every Christmas night. But they lived in a vibrant, technologic society, and it's the nature of technology to advance continuously. That lives would change as a result was inevitable. Furthermore, all but the most intractable pessimists took it for granted that these changes would be for the better. The public gave little thought to unintended consequences, and scientists had no patience with soothsayers' warnings.

The seminal discovery of the period was a gas lighter than air, which even in that place consisted mostly of nitrogen. Its lifting power was seen as bringing people closer to the sun, so they called it helium (extremely ancient Gr. *ἥλιος* [*helios*], sun). Progress to that end was slow, however, and those who first took a few whiffs of the gas, instead of rising into the air, spoke with squeaky voices while their feet stayed anchored to the ground. Undeterred, scientists proceeded in their quest, confident that success depended only on finding the right combination of inspiration and perspiration.

In a remarkable coincidence, a new market for helium was about to open up thousands of miles from where people lived. And it would change the planet forever.

To come straight to the point, reindeer were dying out, felled by *rangiferosis gravis excessivum fumosum aerem inhalationis*, an occupational disease for which there was no cure. Already there was a shortage of these iconic haulers

of celestial sleighs; extinction loomed, even though they had been placed on the Endangered Species List. The more enterprising Santas (there had to be legions of them to visit all those homes during a single night) began to investigate alternative modes of transportation through the air. One of them recalled seeing balloons twisted into all kinds of imaginative shapes – even animals – floating near the ceiling in someone’s living room. He remembered something else: An obnoxious kid, with whispered parental goading fresh in his ear, had cozied up to him in J. C. Nickle’s department store and requested a tank of helium, explaining that he needed it to inflate balloons. Santa, of course, had no intention of giving a tank of helium to an irresponsible brat to spray around the neighborhood and make people squeak, balloons or no balloons. But that peculiar request had stayed in his memory. Now he put two and two together: If helium lifted those balloons to the ceiling, maybe more helium would lift up a heavier body, even his own!

He resolved not to breathe a word of this to his competing namesakes, at least not until he had obtained a patent. Visions of retirement danced in his head, visions of dressing up as a fat child and depositing his bulk in some other Santa’s lap to beg for an expensive toy, maybe a tank of laughing gas.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Santa needed to harness the newly discovered heliotropic wondergas for his own use. It turned out simpler than he had feared. He had observed that the carcasses of dead reindeer became bloated. Their abdomens were, in fact, full of gas, a product of decomposition, as he discovered to his olfactory distress when he stuck a knife into one. When he regained consciousness, he knew what his next

step had to be. Into another bloated abdomen he carefully inserted a hypodermic needle. After the hissing had stopped and it was safe to breathe again, he attached to the needle a tube through which he inflated the animal with helium. As the animal regained its former size, *mirabile dictu*, it rose off the ground! Only by promptly withdrawing the needle and securing the carcass was he able to keep it within reach. Inspiration had clearly trumped perspiration – and he wasn't even a scientist! He exulted mightily and loudly, but as he heard his own voice he realized that in his excitement he had forgotten to turn off the gas!

He had no use for an empty helium tank. And time was definitely not on his side. At least refrigeration was no problem, so he collected the ten largest animals he could find (two extra in case something went wrong) and kept them on ice, that is, on the floor of his sleigh-shed.

He would need more helium, but helium was expensive. It occurred to him to use the money that children had sent him in an effort to win his favor come next Christmas – bribes, he reflected with disgust. But that seemed unethical; he ought to use it to buy presents for the poor. Then, in one of those strokes of good fortune usually reserved for the truly righteous, word reached him of an attractive alternative: a cheaper – and even lighter! – gas called hydrogen. It was made from water (extremely ancient Gr. *ὕδωρ* [*hydōr*], water), which he knew was chemically the same as ice, which in turn he saw all around him in limitless abundance. In due course he had several tanks delivered at a bargain price. He noted in passing that, unlike helium tanks, these bore a curious label: **DANGER. Highly flammable!** OK, no smoking, no problem.

The days grew shorter, then disappeared altogether. Christmas was just around the corner! In the glow of the Northern Lights (to avoid lighting a candle, which that label seemed to discourage), he fueled up eight of his majestic beasts, tethered them to the North Pole, loaded up his sleigh, and jumped aboard. Pulling a quick release, he freed the hydrogenated reindeer from the Pole and sailed into the clear, wintry night.

Gleefully he visited one home after another, each time picking up speed as his load lightened. He knew he was riding a winner. Soon even King Croesus would come begging for a handout! Soon the other Santas would spend their holiday seasons patting the heads of little monsters while he – now He – would shower gifts on the world and win universal adoration. Someone might even write a Christmas carol in his honor.

And then it happened.

Landing on one chimney, he saw too late that a cheerful fire was burning in a hearth just a few feet below. In fact, glowing embers were popping right up the chimney. He watched in mute horror as the heat caused the abdomen of Randolph, his favorite Red-Eyed Reindeer, to swell, to roast, and finally to burst.

In an instant, there was a Bang such as the world had never heard, and this particular Santa, together with his entire team, was blown to countless blinding smithereens. The force of the explosion propelled them into the stratosphere and beyond, into the unmeasurable firmament.

Many, many years (eons) later they were seen from a planet far, far (light years) away and designated as new

stars. An imaginative astronomer read a pattern into their alignment and suggested a constellation with the name *Rangifer\* novus*. Once government funds became available, the Bubble telescope was brought to bear, revealing eight planets orbiting the brightest of the stars. The third closest showed signs of water and therefore the potential to support life.

The rest, as the cognoscenti tell us, is history.

*Herb Heineman*

\*The genus name for reindeer

