

IN THE BEGINNING

Eileen Sylvester

In the beginning, I tried looking off into the distance. I ignored him hoping he would simply go away, then later I rudely shoved him aside. 'Leave me alone,' I said, 'and let me live my life in my own way.' But he was relentless and finally I had no choice but to succumb to his beckoning. I reluctantly 'grew accustomed to his face.' That here-I-am, like-it-or-not face of impending retirement.

'Where to now?' I asked myself. Gradually, after much soul searching, I accepted the inevitable. Simply put — I was retired.

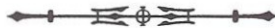
And now, I look at the swaying, leafy branches of the huge birch outside my window, miraculously transferred like a painting onto the mulberry-toned wall of my dining room by the bright sun's reflections, and I marvel how the shimmering shadows create a unique work of art. Like life itself, nature's constantly changing rays of light brush quick, fresh strokes across the canvas.

It makes me so aware that time is such a precious gift. And I realize that the most eventful moments of our lives should not be buried forever with us but passed on to be read by our children, our children's children and others whose lives have touched our own. I decide it is time to write.

But writing one's memoirs can be many things — daunting, confusing, a reminder that one's memory is not quite what it used to be, great fun but mind-boggling at the same time. What to tell and what not to tell is the ongoing dilemma. After all, my ancestors deserve some respect, an eternal right to their privacy. And yet to hold back too much is to lose the history that is so much a part of my past. To hold back too much is to make me wonder whether it is worth writing my memoirs at all.

To review my entire life encompasses a myriad of experiences and emotions and memories. The sights and sounds of everyday life. Those quiet, peaceful moments listening to the whisper of the wind weaving its way through the branches of the tall poplars, the crackle of dried leaves in autumn skimming across the lawn and sidewalk before settling comfortably against the curb. The recollection of all those familiar faces and voices of family, old friends, even passing acquaintances who have played such significant roles in my life.

So much to tell. Time for all those memories to resurface. Time to write 'My Memoirs.



TIME CHANGES EVERYTHING

*Backward, turn backward,
Oh Time in thy flight,
Make me a child again
Just for tonight.'*

These words had erased themselves from my mind many years ago. When I heard them again recently, spoken by the minister in the movie, 'A River Runs Through It,' in one second (and not without some emotion) I was catapulted back to my childhood as I recalled the many times I had listened to my father quoting this poem. Just one such memory can stir up so many more.

The three young boys were oblivious to the wind swirling the brittle autumn leaves about their feet. Concentration was paramount as they pitched the rich reddish-brown chestnuts against the brick wall of the building. The more forceful the pitch, the more likelihood of the chestnut breaking apart with a loud crack and a soft plop as it fell to the ground. In this game the one who broke open the most chestnuts was the winner.

The entire Saturday morning could have been spent in this pleasurable activity had not one of the chestnuts been thrown with such force that it flew through the air completely off course and smashed through the window of the Gibson Avenue Bakery. Fortunately for the boys, but regrettably for the baker, the pane broke inward, sending shards of sharp glass across the table where he was in the midst of preparing more dough for his Saturday customers.

Two of the boys ran across the alleyway and up the three flights of stairs to their apartment over one of the stores on Barton Street East. Those two boys were my brothers, Len and Les. The third boy, whose name was Stanley, was the baker's son. He had nowhere to run. The baker came running out of the store, calling to his son. 'Stauchu, Stauchu,' he shouted, while dragging him by the arm back into the bakery. The baker disposed of the damaged dough and started over.

Being the youngest in the family, I was a mere babe at the time of this incident but understand from the details passed on through the years the matter was forgotten — or if not forgotten, at least forgiven.

And because of my brothers' disastrous escapade and the resulting shouts of the baker to his son, my father (whose name was Stanley) acquired the name of Stauch, the abbreviated Polish form of Stauchu. From that day onward, he was not Daddy or Dad but Stauch. Greeting cards from my parents until the time they died were always signed, 'Mom and Stauch.' And to this day this is how we affectionately refer to our father.

Stauch drove a truck for Dominion Glass for over twenty years, delivering cases of empty bottles or jars to Hamilton Pure Milk, McLaren's, Wagstaffe's and E.D. Smith's, etc. Occasionally, it was a long overnight trip to Windsor to the parent company. I remember my mother dreaded that run. She worried about my father driving on the highways overnight.

From the time I was about nine years old until I was about twelve, I sometimes went

with Stauch on his trips. Even to drive to Winona we would leave early, in the morning darkness, traveling along number 8 Highway to the E.D. Smith factory at the reckless speed of thirty miles an hour. That little old Packard truck would look strange on the road today — solid tires glued to the rim made for a bumpy ride. The piece of wire my father somehow hooked up inside to produce a whistle simply added to its charm. Highway traffic was much lighter in those times and it sometimes seemed we were the only ones on the road. I remember watching the welcoming glow as the sun rose until it slowly shoved aside the last remaining remnants of the night sky. And I felt our day had really begun.

We were always too hungry to wait until noon to eat lunch and so, while my father continued to drive, we would unfold the wax paper my mother had wrapped around the ham or bologna sandwiches and eagerly bite into the soft white bread. It was an era when trucks and gasoline were not only environmentally unfriendly but downright antagonistic. Everything — sandwiches, cookies and fruit — tasted as if they had been in close cahoots with the gasoline tank. But we ate them anyway.

Arriving at E.D. Smith's in Winona, I would sit in the cab while my father hopped onto the back of the truck to help unload the heavy, glass-filled cartons piled high one on top of another. Often one of the men in Shipping & Receiving would give me a quarter. Such riches would last me at least a week, usually squandered in the candy store which just happened to be beside the apartment building on Main Street East where we lived at that time. How convenient for a sweet-toothed child!

Memories of those times are many. The servicemen on leave thumbing their way home. My father always picked them up. "Hop in," he'd say. If there were more than one, the others would jump onto the back of the truck. My father would chat with the one sitting in the cab until we reached the point where he wanted to be dropped off. Then, as each serviceman in the back reached his destination, he would tap on the rear window.

Now, with a smile, I can recall the very human — and male — side of my father. Occasionally, when an attractive young woman was walking by, my father would look into the rear-view mirror, glancing back for another look. Then suddenly remembering his daughter was sitting beside him, he would turn to me and say, 'My goodness, didn't she look like your mother?' The fact that my mother had black hair prematurely turning to gray and the young woman strolling along the sidewalk had the long blonde tresses worthy of an expensive shampoo commercial was interesting, to say the least. Ah yes, Stauch, I was onto you, even at my tender age.

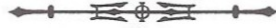
Nor was my father without a sense of humour when it came to playing practical jokes. Such as the time another driver disposed of a sardine tin, empty, except for the reeking remains of a little oil. Stauch wired this tin over the manifold of the other driver's truck. It was only a short time before the driver investigated and when he discovered this odious — and odorous — sardine tin, he removed it and angrily tossed it over his shoulder. Stauch later retrieved it, only to repeat this nasty little prank, leaving the distraught driver wondering days later why it was taking so long for the acrid fumes to disappear.

I, of course, knew nothing of such little incidents at the time, but simply took pleasure in

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tagging along on Stauch's many trips. Mission accomplished, we would head back, first taking time to stop for my father's favourite, a pineapple sundae. For me, a lemon soda. When the old gray Packard was safely parked for the night in the yard of Dominion Glass at Chapple and Lloyd Streets, we would walk home.

My father seemed old at the time. Fortyish. And yet today, now that my children are in their early forties, they are really quite young, or so it seems to me. Can it be that Time Changes Everything?



BIOGRAPHY

Eileen Sylvester

Eileen Sylvester lives in Stoney Creek, Ontario. A freelance writer for some years, her goal now is to complete her Memoirs, to be passed down to her three children — and their children — with the hope that the reader's and writer's pleasure in recalling the past will be as one.