

Let It Be Recorded...



A COLLECTION OF MEMOIRS

BY THE ACADEMY FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

FROM THE
HIGH DESERT BRANCH OF THE CALIFORNIA WRITERS CLUB

Let It Be Recorded . . .
a Collection of Memoir Stories

Students of the
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Awarded First Place



The Story of Seth Seth Anjejo story *Melissa Owuor*

FOURTEEN YEARS OLD. A 14-year-old boy among sixteen siblings. I was lost in the mix among the masses of unequal division between boys and girls: ten boys and six girls.

The oldest and boldest was Jack, who set the bar high and, in turn, pushed our minds to want to achieve more. That's all anyone needed to know about us; Jack did it and the rest followed, except for me. No matter how much they tried, it seemed as though my siblings slipped at one point or another so, of course, I was waiting for my turn. But for now, I was Seth, "the boy who could do no wrong."

My father had put every ounce of faith and hope of his family breaking away from a low-class life on my back. Of course, he did not say this, but it was obvious through the way I was treated compared to everyone else.

We lived in a small village within Kisumu, Kenya. We were not a rich family; in fact, we were fairly poor and our home was a hut made of mud. The walls were dark brown and were filled with rough bumps that caused the layout to be uneven. The walls ran in a circular fashion around the house, but the cracks within it made it look destructible, although it almost wasn't. The hut had been through rough and strong winds, vicious storms and floods to extremely hot days. The roof was made from grass and twigs bound by a strong rope to ensure the roof's stability. There were a few windows, which, in truth, were square holes in the wall.

These holes allowed a cool breeze once in a while that soothed us during hot days. The windows had no frames, but were perfectly aligned squares covered with black cloths with gold-brown crossed

lines that were pinned on the windows to ensure us some privacy.

The ground was bare and cold but also smooth. It was layered with dust that the wind blew in through the doorways, which were door-less and also frameless. They seemed like rectangular holes in the dark walls, but like the windows, they were perfectly cut.

There were four rooms in our home: the main room, kitchen, my parents' room, and the bedroom my siblings and I shared. Our bathroom was outside. It was a hole in the ground surrounded by a metal frame in an attempt to give as much privacy as possible. To take a shower we had to go over to the river and fill our buckets with water. We would then bring the buckets back home and shower within the trees and bushes.

In my family I was viewed as the most responsible, and I was always reminded of that as my father left for work every morning. He would gently put his hand on my shoulder and softly whisper to me, "I need you to take care of your mother and make sure your brothers and sisters don't get into any trouble while I'm gone."

I would just look up and nod stiffly with my arms straight by my sides against my slim body frame – like a soldier reporting for duty – and I would respond, "Yes, Baba." I would then stand by the door and watch as Baba walked away, admiring his every step until he was completely out of sight.

Baba wasn't a harsh man. He had expectations for his family and if they were not met he showed his concern through different forms of punishments. He made us all stronger in times of despair and protected us in times of trouble.

"Stand tall. Keep your head up and your shoulders level. A man does not give up," he always repeated.

These words were enough, not because of their deeper meaning, but because of who said them. Baba was a tough man whom everyone knew and respected. No one ever dared to go against what he said. I had to have been his number one fan. I exalted everything he did and saw no imperfections in him and it was no secret that I was his favorite child.

Baba and Mama were not too shy to mention “He’ll be the first of us to make something of himself” enthusiastically to their families and friends. It seemed odd to me that they put all their faith in me, a 14-year-old boy.

Mama was a completely different type of person compared to Baba. She was somewhat strict, but more caring. She had a hard heart that had seen and was forced to endure many trials, yet it was still filled with an immeasurable amount of love. She was a woman of little to no words, but when she spoke it was almost always to assure her children that everything would be just fine.

The most memorable thing about my mother was her brown eyes. You could tell what she was thinking simply by looking into her eyes. She was a simple woman who did not worry or complain about many things, so when she did worry, we all knew it was something big. She always bound her head with the same light piece of green and brown cloth with repeating patterns of multiple dark brown flowers.

Mama always tried to find the good in every bad situation. She tried to be happy and find the sunny side of everything life threw at her.

Her leg was one of those situations. Mama had been feeling a wrenching pain in her leg, but we did not have the money to go to a hospital and so, for the moment, all we knew was that there was something wrong with her leg. Sometimes the pain would become unbearable and in turn cause her to lie in bed, uncomfortably tossing and turning.

Even though we could not afford a hospital, Mama was really good at making medicine from herbs, which was a survival necessity for all the villagers. Mama chopped off the roots and stems of some plants, as well as leaves and twigs off others. She would then place them in the large, rough black pot in the kitchen which held liters of steaming hot water. There were different herb ingredients and recipes we used for different health problems.

There came a day when Baba had gone off to work and Mama’s leg pains had begun. After drinking a glass of herbal medicine and

sleeping for a few hours, she woke up with the pain slightly reduced. What Mama did after this was what I found incredible, as well as unforgettable. She raised her head from the flat, lifeless bed and shifted her body to face the pale dry wall. Slowly she moved her legs across the bed until they gently touched the cold, dirty floor. While attempting to stand, she winced in pain and lost her balance. As much as she wanted to prove she was okay and could handle her problems on her own, this problem seemed almost bigger than her. Before she made her second attempt, she reached across her bed and grabbed her flowery head cloth which she tightly bound on her head, covering her dusty brown hair with the occasional silver hairs in the mix.

She was filled with determination, but once again, as she rose, Mama lost her balance and fell back upon the bed. My eyes were pinned on her as I remained hidden by the doorway, silently cheering her on. I don't think I have ever seen Mama try so hard to do something in my entire life. As she made her third attempt, she began to wobble as her bare feet landed on the cold ground. This time I could not just watch. I ran to her and grabbed her by the waist, using all the strength in my feeble arms to hold my mama up.

She just smiled and said, "Thank you, Son," but her smooth brown eyes remained fixed on the far pale wall. A single glistening tear rolled down her cheek, but she quickly wiped it away with her shaking hand. I remember burying my face on the side of her body and wrapping my arms tightly around her waist as I wept. I could not help myself. Mama was such a loving and kind woman and to see her go through so much pain just crushed me.

Between my sobs I was able to choke out the words "I love you." I did not look at her face, but I know that one or more tears must have broken free as she held me tightly and said, "I love you more, child," with a shaky, yet loving, voice.

I helped her walk across the room and past the doorway, confused as to where she was going. As we approached the doorway that led outside, Mama bent down and slowly grabbed the garden tools off the ground. She turned to me and smiled as she always did and said,

“Thank you, child.”

Mama then loosened her grip on me as I let go of her waist and she dragged her bare feet on the cold floor onto the soil past the main doorway while the tools she held weakly in her hands scraped the ground behind her. When she reached the garden, she grabbed her tools and began the garden work. She was straining and I could see her wrinkle her forehead and wince in pain, but I couldn't run out and help her this time. She had to do this. Mama did not want her pain to stop her from providing for her family. She knew I was sitting right outside our home watching her, and she would turn her head once in a while to smile at me in an attempt to assure me that everything was fine, but even she knew that her smile did not make me worry any less.

She kept on for more than an hour, using all the strength she had left. As the heat became more unbearable for her, she untied the cloth from her head and wiped the sweat from her face as she moved the cloth across her forehead and neck. She then took the brown and green cloth and placed it upon her neck. I remember her looking at me one more time before she began singing, “*Vumilia, roho yangu, / Majaribu nikama moto, / Yanayo choma imani yangu, / Bwana naomba unisaidie.*”

I began singing the song, as well, but to myself. It was almost like a whisper because I wanted to hear Mama's voice. She sang this song at this time for a reason. It was a cry for help to God, as well as asking her heart to persevere against the odds life had placed upon her.

The next day we had to go to school, so we woke up at five o'clock in the morning as usual. Mama was already up making our breakfast, and as she finished, she placed the cups of tea on the table surrounding the loaf of bread we were all to share.

At this time, Mama would always ask, “What did you all dream about?” to start off a morning conversation among us.

Sometimes it felt like a competition in which some of us exaggerated the details of our dreams to make our dreams the most interesting. Naomi, my oldest sister, would always just watch and laugh as the dream competitions took place, but that morning was

different. I remember I started off that morning claiming, “I dreamt that we were all taking a ride in the city, in a nice red car with Baba driving. The road looked deserted, as we were the only people on that road, but every time Baba got to a part of the road with a sign, we would get into a car accident, but no one would get hurt.

“Eventually, after repeating the same cycle three times, Baba got out of the car and sat in front of the car with his legs bent, his knees to his chest, and his face buried in his hands as he wept bitterly in anger and frustration. Naomi got out of the car and ran to Baba, trying to pull his face away from his hands, but it was impossible. Baba just sat there as he cried without any hope.

“Within his sobs he uttered, ‘I just can’t do it. I can’t.’ Naomi gave up trying to pull his face away from his hands and instead sat beside him and began to cry, as well. But as she sat next to him, Naomi continued to beg him to get back in the car and drive. And that’s when I woke up.”

After I finished my description of the dream, the room was quiet for a moment before Elijah took his turn. I believe we all took a moment, because it was impossible for anyone to imagine Baba in such a vulnerable state. I don’t know if that is the reason I always remember this dream when I think back to that day, but what I do know is that it always troubled me. To me that dream sounded more like a nightmare that terrified me for some unknown reason.

After we finished breakfast, as well as talking about our dreams, we headed back to our room where we changed into our worn-out school uniforms: a blue, collared shirt and gray shorts. As I buttoned my shirt, I noticed the missing dark blue button, which led me to realize how old my shirt looked. As I glanced down at my shorts, I also realized how faded they were, but as I gazed around the room, I noticed that everyone’s was the same way, including the light blue dresses the girls wore.

“Bye, Mama!” We were off to school, which was three miles away and, yes, we would walk to school every morning on our very bare feet. Baba could not afford to buy us any shoes or socks, but we

understood because many other kids we knew were in the same situation. We dragged our feet on the rough, dusty ground each morning, but we never complained. As we made our way to school, we always seemed to find something to do or talk about. As I walked I glared down at my feet that were already dusty. The layer at the very bottom of my foot felt dead, but that feeling had been there for years. I would step on small rocks as I walked, but by then we were all used to it and our feet, which were almost always numb, could barely feel the pain.

“Can you throw any farther than that, Seth?” Sam asked from my far right. He had thrown a small rock forward, quite far from our sight, as he held a handful of other small rocks in his other hand.

I bent down and picked up a smooth rock and was ready to launch it. I already knew the answer to his question, but I turned to him and said, “Of course I can,” confidently.

Elijah, who had been walking quietly behind us, finally spoke, “I don’t like the way Mama is pushing herself. She’s gonna make her leg worse, but she won’t listen to anyone.”

We all silently agreed, but Sam added, “She needs to push herself and act like she’s as good as new. We all know Mama. She’s not going to want to seem weak around us. That’s just who she is.”

I suddenly thought back to what had happened the day before and said, “Mama woke up yesterday after taking her medicine, but she was still in pain and yet she went over to the garden and worked for over two hours.”

There was silence before Naomi suggested, “Maybe we should just talk to her and tell her that we’re worried and she doesn’t have to push herself so hard anymore because we can help her out more. I’ll even stay home from school tomorrow to make sure she’s okay.” After talking about Mama for a while, we finally reached the school and, at the gates, as always, were a couple of teachers with sticks ready to beat the kids who were late for school. We had a few minutes to spare, so we escaped the beating and went our separate ways to our classrooms.

My school situation was quite unique: it was something that was never done before. From a young age, roughly since I was in standard one (first grade), I stood out from my classmates because I “significantly exceeded their expectations,” as they said to my parents. The school was aware of my family’s situation and was willing to pay my school fees as long as I maintained my number one class rank. If I even dropped to second, they would stop the funding. I actually enjoyed learning and coming to school. Back at home I would always be the one reading my science textbook while my siblings were out playing games. I loved mathematics and science, but there was just one problem, I had not figured out what I wanted to become.

I remember that day in school I did not focus in even one of my classes. I kept on replaying what had happened with Mama the day before. I wanted to help her, but I didn’t know how. All I could do was read science books from school and try to understand what was causing her pain.

On our way back home, Mama was still the topic of our conversations. I was walking in front of everyone else holding a long stick in my right hand that I dragged on the soil, forming a marker for the path we had taken. The temperature had become undoubtedly much hotter as the plain blue sky accompanied the unbearable sun. As I turned the corner through the trees while wiping the sweat that was running down my forehead, our garden was suddenly visible. But as I came closer, I saw a green and brown cloth with flowery patterns lying against the plants on the soil.

“Mama?!” I dropped my stick and ran as fast as I ever had towards the garden and I could hear my siblings behind me call for Mama the same way I did as they followed behind me. When I got to her, I saw her lying there on the ground with her eyes closed. Sweat was dripping from her forehead and rolling down her neck. When I looked toward her leg, it was bleeding and it was plainly clear what had happened. While striking a plant with the machete, she must have missed and struck herself on the leg and, as she fell, she landed on the same leg, because her bloody leg was filled with dirt while the other was not as

dirty.

We carried her and gently laid her down on the bed. Elijah and Kenneth ran to get Baba while I ran outside and grabbed the machete with my shaking hand. I needed to cut off the root of some plants, which I placed into a pot of boiling water together with salt. When the herbal mixture was ready, I grabbed an old cloth, dipped it into the hot herbal treatment as it burnt my hand while I attempted to squeeze out the excess water. While attending to Mama's wound, I recited a prayer in my head, over and over, begging God not to take her.

"Mama? Mama, please, you need to wake up. Please, Mama," Sam cried as he wiped her head with a cloth that had been placed in cold water.

From the corner of my eye I could see that he was trembling, as well. I was beyond terrified. I couldn't lose Mama, and the thought of it unleashed an uncontrollable amount of tears down my cheeks. "Please, God, don't take her. Just please, don't," I repeatedly whispered in between my sniffles.

My father finally ran in with Elijah and Kenneth trailing behind, but he did not say a word. He slowly made his way over to Mama, his eyes filled with tears of shock and sadness and he knelt down by her side. He soon stood up and carefully lifted Mama and carried her out. We all quietly followed behind, with our eyes fixed on Mama.

When we reached the hospital, Mama was taken into a room and the doctor assured us that everything would be just fine.

Still Baba said nothing. He didn't speak for hours. Finally the doctor came back and told us she was awake and we could go in to see her. But before we went in he said, "She just needs to rest. Let her wounds heal and she will be okay, but her leg has been through too much. For now she won't be able to walk on it."

I didn't care. All I wanted was to see her and when we all finally saw Mama and her smile, we worried less.

Before we even left the hospital that day, I had already decided what I wanted to become. I wanted to become a doctor, specifically one who mainly specializes in medicine, a pharmacist. I assured my

mother that I would be the one to find a medicine that would help her walk again.

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***Melissa Owuor** lives in Apple Valley, CA, although, she was born and raised in Kenya until the age of eleven whereby her family moved to the United States for a new life adventure. Melissa has an older sister and two younger brothers. Upon arriving in her adopted country, she became interested in listening to piano pieces, as well as playing the piano. Her favorite modern composers are Brian Crain and Yiruma, but she also enjoys the earlier works of Beethoven and Mozart.*



Melissa loves playing and watching basketball. Her favorite player is Stephen Curry who plays for the Golden State Warriors, which is also her favorite basketball team. She plans on attending college and studying pre-medicine to eventually become a Neurologist. Her father, Seth Anjejo, is a pharmacist for CVS and volunteered as her memoir star for this project.

All Our Yesterdays



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by the Academy for Academic Excellence

in association with
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Apple Valley, California

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AWARDED FIRST PLACE

We Never Knew

Annaliese Fazzi story

Alex Austin

Logline: A young girl interviews an elderly woman about her experience growing up in Germany during World War II, bringing to light the life of a civilian—an uncommon perspective of the war.



She welcomes me into her house. I look down at her, an uncommon action for someone who is only five foot two. She is a small woman, maybe six inches shorter than me, with short, thinning grey hair. Her face, though wrinkled, still maintains a pleasant shape, with noticeable, but not rigid, cheekbones and smooth rosy lips. Her alert eyes stand out most of all, and I know that she must have been stunningly gorgeous in her younger years.

“Nice to meet you, ma’am. My name is Alex,” I say as I hold out my hand.

She takes it in her surprisingly firm grip and replies, “Hello, Alex. I’m Annaliese. Please, take a seat.” She gestures to the living room and makes her way to what is obviously her preferred spot on a sofa, designated by a light blanket on one side and papers gathered loosely into a pile on the other. I take a seat on another sofa adjacent to her, pencil and notebook in hand. We sit in silence for a few moments, she awaiting my cue, and I nervous and unsure how to begin.

She breaks the silence by asking, “So, what is it you would like to know?”

Snapping my thoughts back into their usual rhythm, I reply, “Well, when your daughter contacted me to let me know you were interested in this project of mine, she mentioned that you were in Germany during World War II. I'm intrigued and would love to know more.”

“Oh, of course. Well, Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany in

January 1933. I was only nine years old at the time, but my parents kept up to date with the news as much as they could. Since the end of World War I our country had yet to recover. We had food shortages such that I thought it was normal to eat small portions. Many people didn't have jobs. Luckily, my father did. He was a trained herbalist but worked in procurement in a paint factory. He didn't earn much, but that didn't matter since the value of our money was nearly nothing. As soon as he earned his paycheck, we bought as much food as we could.

"The country was split into factions: communist and socialist. At times it wasn't safe to be out in the street because the police would beat people with their rubber clubs.

"A few years after Hitler became Chancellor, people started to find jobs again. The factions of communism and socialism faded, and the entire country started to become communist. It was comforting to know that the economy was improving. We thought Hitler was a pretty good guy; he had helped our country get back on its feet. Food began to be more abundant. We were finally on a path to recovery from the Great Depression.

"Then, in September 1939, Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia and Poland and started World War II. I was fifteen years old at that time. When my mother heard the news, she cried. She had already lived through the First World War, but her first fiancé had not. He died of lockjaw during the first few months of the war. I comforted her and told her this new war would be over in just a few weeks. I did not know how complex the issues of the war actually were."

Annaliese paused, and I took the chance to jump in. "So, what did you know at that time?"

She thought for a moment. "Hitler was a very good speaker. He could spout lots of rhetoric. He was really a fascinating speaker. He was always spouting statistics, always numbers and whatnot. When he spoke, everything he said was bent towards the German people, to make them feel better and optimistic. When he gave a speech, everything stopped and everyone listened. He was one of the most talented motivational speakers; he made us feel good about working and improving the economy.

"I don't remember if ever he told the public his reasons for invading, but I don't think he would have had to tell. I believe the public trusted that everything he did was to help the economy."

“Okay,” I say as I scribble down notes in sloppy shorthand. “And what happened after the war started?”

She sat back on the sofa and folded her hands over one another. “About a year after the war started, I was sent to a youth hostel near the Baltic Sea in East Prussia. The hostel was situated on a bluff overlooking the *Frische Haff*, or roughly translated, the Fresh Bay. Accompanied by another girl of about the same age, we were assigned duty as leaders of a grade school. We had to supervise the entire group of about sixty girls in all their non-school activities. This included overseeing that they got their homework done, took care of their personal hygiene, got up in the morning and got to bed at night. These young girls had been evacuated from Berlin because of the nightly bombing raids there. The teachers were there strictly to teach and nothing more. In other words, we did all the work. There were a few things that were not required of us: cooking and general house-cleaning. There were other people there who did those chores. We were strictly forbidden to enter the kitchen of the staff quarters.

“The food was tolerable in the beginning, but as the months and year went by, the quality declined. At some point it got so bad that we had sauerkraut just about three times a day. We had a good time with the children after they did their homework. We played games, went for long walks, and had songfests.

“The worst was when one of the children picked up head lice. Yuk! I went to the drugstore and got medication to kill the little beasties. Then it was my duty to apply it and wash their hair, which I had to do in shifts, since sixty was too much at one time. Then we had a nightly ritual of combing their hair with a fine tooth comb to make sure the nits were dead. We got rid of them in about a month, and then I managed to catch them, for which I washed and combed my own hair.

“We spent the summer swimming in the bay. Sometimes we got a boat ride to the outer banks to the open sea.

“In the winter we were snowed in for many weeks with snowdrifts up to our shoulders. The bay froze solid and we could ice skate on it, but there were never enough skates for all of us. When springtime came and the ice started to thaw, we could hear loud booms echoing across the bay and, suddenly, there were long deep cracks in the ice.

“That summer we could hear war planes flying over, and after a few

weeks most of the students were sent back to Berlin because the invasion of Poland had already passed and the drive into Russia had begun. We were too close to the border; all that area is now Poland. A few months later I, too, was sent home.

“Berlin was still being bombed quite frequently, but somehow we all managed. Many nights we spent in air raid shelters or, in many cases, the basement. Everyone always had a suitcase with them in which they kept their most precious belongings. There were always fires burning somewhere nearby from incendiary bombs. On occasion a bomb would not detonate, and when that happened everyone evacuated the nearby buildings until the bomb either went off on its own or someone detonated it.

“The bombs often shattered windows of any nearby buildings. I was old enough to help repair them with cardboard, a much more abundant resource than glass. Sometimes we would get glass and be able to fit it to a window, but those instances were few and far between.

“By then I had returned to school. I went to a technical school which taught me business math, bookkeeping, and how to use typewriters and accounting machines. I also learned shorthand English and shorthand Spanish.

“In November of 1944 I was drafted into the labor force again. This time I was sent to the Ruhr Basin in Hagen, Westphalia (northwestern Germany). I was sent to a military base and stationed at the large searchlight. Other women and I were schooled in the operation of the searchlight, but it was rarely used because of a lack of gasoline to fuel it. It was our job to run the searchlight during an air raid, and if we were out of gasoline, we were instructed to use flares.

“We hid in foxholes near the searchlight during raids when English fighters would strafe us. Bombs were falling over my head many a time, but I was never harmed with more than a scratch from debris. On the base, just as it was anywhere else in Germany, food, as well as the coal used to heat our barracks, was rationed heavily,

“Our sergeant often sent us out to forage for potatoes from the nearby farmers. He once traded the few gallons of gasoline that we had left for a truckload of coal. A few weeks later we were ordered by headquarters to return all our gasoline; there were few raids during this time, so they

expected us to have some remaining. We were in a fix because we had not actually been authorized to trade the gasoline, so we filled the empty gasoline canisters with antifreeze and placed them in the mix of others. Headquarters was never able to trace the mysterious canisters of antifreeze back to us.

“A few months later we were ordered to return home, but many of us no longer had a home. Those who did not had to find one. The Allies were closing the ring around Berlin and I was trapped inside, so I could not escape to any other town or village. I found shelter in a private house that was occupied by a mother with twins, a retired couple (the wife had a broken leg), and the owner of the house whose family had been evacuated to a different part of the country. I was allowed to stay as long as I helped with the chores. I remained there from early April to late June of 1945.

“The fighting came closer and closer to us as the American troops made their way towards the city center. They did not fight near us, but they did order us to clear the house so that they could stay the night inside. We all spent the night outside; luckily, it was not raining or too cold. The next morning the troops left; the house was trashed. We spent the day cleaning up the mess the soldiers left for us. We did not complain too much because we were still lucky enough to have a roof over our heads.

“When the Americans came through, they assigned a curfew— all Germans were restricted from leaving their homes between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. This was to protect us from the fighting, from stray bullets, or from falling victim to any number of atrocities.

“Travel for us Germans was restricted to only fifty kilometers. Anyone travelling farther than that had to obtain permission from the British occupational forces.

“After the war ended in April, all the stores were closed down and no food was available for weeks. I was able to stay sustained on stale bread and whatever canned food was left in the house. I also went out to gather nettles and other leaves to cook like spinach. When I could I would go to the nearby farmers to beg for rutabagas.

“Hoping that my parents had escaped, I moved to their hometown in the southeast. My mother eventually took a secret trip from the American side back to the Soviet side. She was living in a small little room on her own until I convinced her to come stay with me. It was at this point

that I learned my father had been taken to a prison camp. I was worried about him and my mother, and I feared for the worst until my father returned to us three years later. He told us that he had been in three different Soviet prison camps in the last three years.

“After I knew both my parents were safe, I went and worked for the American Army Air Corps. With my education, I worked in administration. That’s where I met Frank Fazzi, a Chief Master Sergeant in administration, the man I would come to marry.” Annaliese folds her hands in her lap and grins at me, signifying that she has now tied her story up into a dainty knot.

Curious as I am, though, I still spot a few loose ends. “So, you were in Berlin when they started to round up the Jews. How much did you know about that?”

She licks her lips and glances momentarily at the ceiling. “Well, it started when the Jews were required to wear the Star of David on the outside of their clothes. No one thought anything of it. We did know that the government persecuted the Jews, but there was nothing we could do to change that. We owed our lives to Adolf Hitler for helping Germany out of a rut. After a while, one by one, the Jews in our community started to disappear. We were told that they were sent to a ghetto. We knew that the Jews were being separated from the rest of us, but we didn’t think much of it. No one could imagine or comprehend the cruelties that awaited them. No one even considered it a possibility. The civilian masses were completely unaware of the horrific cruelty of Hitler, and we were just as shocked as everyone else after the war when the pictures showed up in the papers and the radio broadcasts talked about the mass genocide.”

“So,” I interrupt politely. “Did you have any Jewish friends or personally know any of the Jews who were persecuted?”

“Oh, no,” she replies. “I didn’t know any of them. I knew there were Jewish families in our community, but I never knew them personally.”

I am amazed at how well the concentration camps and the mass murders were kept so secret from the populations of Germany. “Who did know about the camps and what happened there?” I ask her.

“Only people who were in the military, but they never spoke of it when they were in the city. The people knew that if we spoke out against the regime we would be sent to a prison camp or concentration camp. Obviously, that’s no good.”

“So, what was with the whole ‘Heil Hitler’ salute?” I inquire, slightly embarrassed by my lack of knowledge.

Annaliese laughs for a few moments and replies with a vivid grin. “It wasn’t quite a salute. Well, it was, but never for me. For most people it was a daily greeting. Like ‘good morning’ and ‘good evening’ and such. It started as a salute in the military when Hitler became Chancellor, but at some point everyone was required to greet others with it. Every now and then when we were alone we would still say ‘good morning’ and whatnot, but we had to be very careful, because if one of the SA or SS officers overheard you, they could arrest you for speaking against the regime.”

“I see. And after the war, when you moved to America, did you encounter a lot of prejudice for being German?”

“Not really. But on occasion I did. I met a woman in Mississippi who had lost her husband to the war. She had thought that she would hate all Germans.” Annaliese gives a thin smirk. “Until she met me. Then she learned that most Germans had nothing to do with the war, we were all just suffering from the consequences of it.

“We were hungry a lot in Germany, and that’s something that really amazed me about America. In Germany the shelves in grocery stores were always barren, but when I moved to America and went shopping, the shelves were all so packed with lots of food.” Her hands beheld the memory in thin air, her arms sweeping out to illustrate the vast quantities of food in U.S. stores.

Given the small amount of information I have of Germany, I wonder how much Annaliese had known of the United States. “What did you know about the U.S. while you were in Germany? What was well known about America?”

The elderly woman takes a moment to collect her thoughts, then answers. “Well, we never really heard too much. We did hear of the gangsters in Chicago, though. And we knew about Hollywood and the movie stars. In our theaters they always showed cowboy-and- Indian movies. We knew about President Roosevelt and his wife. Oh! And Shirley Temple! I watched all the Shirley Temple movies. We listened to a bit of American music, but many of the singers were Jewish so, slowly, the records were banned. And that was about it.

“It was much different when I moved here. I’m not sure what I was

expecting, but I realized that people are still people, no matter where they are.

“I was a bit surprised by the weather. In Germany there are four distinct seasons, where here in America they will blend together and sometimes completely skip a season. The humidity took a bit of adjusting to, but not too much.” She smiles contentedly.

With nothing more on my mind to mention, I close my notebook and stand. “Thank you very much, ma’am. It was splendid getting the chance to hear your story.”

The small woman stands up and I offer my hand to her. She shakes it and replies. “Of course, of course. You are very welcome.”

I walk towards the door but stop and turn around. I unfold my notebook to a blank page. “One more question, if I may.” She nods her head. “If you were to give some advice to the younger generations, based on your experiences, what would you tell them?”

I scribble down her response. We say our brief goodbyes and I leave. As I drive home, her response rings in my ears.

“Take life as it is. Know that nothing is free. Life is not fair, but you should be happy anyway. And most of all, trust in God.”



Bio: Alex Austin is a spectacular and exciting person once you get past her quiet and shy nature. She aspires to be a proficient Naval Engineer and Architect in order to pursue her childhood dream of designing an ocean city after she graduates from Stevens Institute of Technology. Her favorite pastimes are drawing and dabbling in other art mediums, as well as writing fantasy stories, which she one day hopes to publish. This young lady also finds herself intrigued with pondering the nature of individuals compared to the nature of humanity as a whole, the purpose of existence and sentience, and how to find true happiness.

Footprints From Around the World



A Collection of Memoirs
by University Preparatory High School

in association with
High Desert Branch of the California Writers Club

Footprints from Around the World

A Collection of Memoir
Stories

Students of
University Preparatory High School
Victorville, California

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1st Place

My Lucy

Thurman Taylor Story

by Aaliyah Jones

A man's life changes drastically the night his wife, Lucy, experiences a major headache. When he learns the true reason for her pain, life as he knows it changes forever.



When I began writing this memoir, I intended to write about my grandfather, Thurman Taylor, and his blissful high school days spent playing football. A few weeks after I began interviewing him, my grandmother, Lucille Taylor, had two strokes, both on the same night, and another only three months later. I wrote this memoir in his words, along with my memories and experiences. This is that story. His voice is deep and rough as he begins to speak.

Ever since Lucy, my beautiful wife, had her stroke, my shoddy memory has become even worse. My old, worn knees ache as, unsteady, I push the cart around the small grocery store, and I struggle to recall the items from the list that I left back home. I reach for a sack of sugar and my fingers seem to momentarily solidify, preventing me from picking up the bag. I pause for what feels like the tenth time on this particular aisle, and this time it is my right knee that throbs and aches, the reminder of one of my early years when I played football.

No matter how much I reminisce about my younger years, my thoughts always drift back to my Lucy. Just the thought of the way she walked, the way she talked, her alluring smile and infectious laugh bring tears to my eyes. Back before her strokes, Lucy was the one who would shop, mainly cook, and set me back on track, no matter how far I strayed. Now even the simplest tasks

deplete my energy. I grasp a box of cereal *am I going to get through this shopping trip without my Lucy?*

Ever since her stroke, nothing has been the same. Although I visit her at the hospital every day, my hours beside her get shorter, and my nights without her feel longer. I haven't slept alone in forty-nine years, except for the last four months. *Four months ago, November 29, 2017, was when the first of three strokes occurred, two in the same night.* Lucille had an ischemic stroke, followed by a hemorrhagic stroke.

My thoughts drag me from the grocery store and transport me to the precise night that changed our lives forever. I was in a congregation elders' meeting—I am a Jehovah's Witness—when our good friend and neighbor, Kelly, came in to the meeting, exclaiming that Lucy was in overwhelming pain.

"Go on, Thurman. Take care of your wife," an elder brother urged me.

I snatched my cane from where it was leaning against the rough, sandy-colored wall and rushed outside to the kingdom hall parking lot. My wife was hunched over in the driver's side seat of our black Tahoe, her head lying on the steering wheel. Dread seemed to flow through my body, like the feeling of drinking ice cold water first thing in the morning, carving a path from my throat to my toes.

"Lucy, what's going on?" I questioned her. My gut told me that she wouldn't respond. I was dolorously correct and she offered me no response. "Honey, can you hear me? Lucy? What's going on, what's wrong, sweetheart?"

Lucy showed a slight amount of consciousness then. "My head hurts, Thurman," she. "Very bad."

When her words registered, a wretched feeling began to creep from my stomach to my throat, causing my eyes to burn with forthcoming tears. Lucy's left arm was limp by her side. Her right hand was raised to her face, resting on the steering wheel beneath her nose. Her eyes were scrunched painfully shut. I could see her breaths becoming shallow and slow.

I carefully opened the driver's side door and lifted her

wearied frame over the center console, placing her in the passenger seat of the truck. When I put the key into the ignition, my heartbeats seemed to quicken then stop all together. I looked over at my wife of fifty-two years as she leaned against the closed, passenger's side door. *Dear Jehovah, please heal her* was the only thing crossing my mind as I pulled myself into the truck.

Lucy broke me out of my thoughts. "My arm, it feels so cold."

"I know, Lucy. We're going to go to the hospital," I replied as I stepped on the gas. I hoped she was not going to argue. My Lucy just hates hospitals with a passion, although she makes sure to attend to all of her doctor's appointments and checkups, as well as her physicals.

"I do not want to go to the doctors, I do not need to go to the hospital," Lucy answered, but she continued to hold the right side of her head.

"Lucy, what are you going to do, then?" I asked her. Knowing my wife, I suspected she would rather just go home.

"I just need to take an ibuprofen and rest for a little bit, and I will be fine," she replied.

"Okay, okay," I said. I felt there was something more than a migraine going on, but maybe my Lucy was right. It could be that she was just exhausted and needed to rest, as she had been extremely busy with the death and funeral of her brother, Leoren, and caring for her mother. She also worked as a caregiver for a woman named Pat who required a lot of care, which used up a lot of Lucy's energy as well.

Even after we arrived home, she continued to hold her head, so I called my daughters, Tania and Tanya, and told them I believed something was wrong with their mother. Tanya was closer, so she arrived at our home quicker. We drove Lucy to a hospital, where my eldest daughter, Tania, met us.

As I look back on it now, the thoughts pass through my mind as a blur. I am caught, sifting through my memories at her bedside the morning after she was admitted to the hospital because of the stroke.

The team of neurosurgeons finally came in with an

explanation. “She may or may not regain use of the left arm and hand, as well as the left leg,” one of the doctors explained. “The bleed is located in the right hemisphere of Lucille’s brain. The right hemisphere, where the bleed is, is where her vision is coordinated. It all just depends on whether or not the bleed has damaged her sight or use of her left side. Because it is so early, we don’t know whether the damage is temporary or permanent. We’ll learn more about her condition as time passes. So for now, we’re going to focus on getting Lucille to a stable level and attempt to control the bleeding in her brain.”

“Any questions?” the main surgeon asked.

“How big is the bleed? Small or big or what? Do you know the size of it yet?” one of my daughters asked.

I couldn’t tell which, I could only hear the blood through my veins, and my chest felt extremely tight. I gripped my wife’s right hand even tighter and prayed for her recovery. How could this have happened? What could have caused this? The thoughts continue to invade my mind, but I know that the doctors and surgeons have no definite idea what caused Lucy’s brain to bleed.

This memory fades and another replaces it. It’s about a week after Lucy had the stroke. I am sitting on the couch in the front room with my only granddaughter while a movie plays in the background. Neither one of us is listening to or paying any attention to it. I am telling her about my time playing football during—or rather, throughout—high school.

“I was playing as a linebacker, then fullback,” I told her. “One day my coach told me that I was going to take the place of another star player, a senior, on the team, and I played right tackle from then on.”

“Was he upset? That the coach gave you his spot? That player on your team, I mean,” my granddaughter asked.

“Oh, yeah, he was real mad. I wasn’t even as big as him, you see. I was sixteen; I hadn’t even turned seventeen yet. But my coach had decided, and there was no point in arguing with him. So I started playing in the right tackle spot. Then after that, they had me as a kicker. One game I was kicking off—it was like the third game we’d

played that season so far—I kicked off and somebody keyed on me.” I answered her.

“What does that mean?” she questioned me.

“They wanted to eliminate me from the game. So we were running down the field after I kicked off—as soon as I kicked off, I started running—and some guy came around from the side and hit me right in my ankle. I sprained my ankle so bad I couldn’t kick anymore for like two games. And I was in the whirlpool all the time, trying to fix my ankle.

Finally, when they put me back in the game, they put me back in the middle guard position.”

“What’s that?”

“A line man. I hadn’t ever been a lineman before. I had never played lineman, but I excelled at it. Matter of fact, there was one critical game when we were playing against a team that my old nemesis—from when I was a kid—played on. He was a year older than me, I can’t remember his name. I remember he thought he was going to make a touchdown, and when he was coming right up the middle, I nailed him, and the crowd went nuts. I remember when he got up he called me a punk.” I chuckled. “He was mad because I tackled him and stopped him from making a touchdown. That was when I got my reputation as Stop, like I could stop people. A little after that they renamed me the Hulk, you know, like the superhero hulk, the Incredible Hulk? I wasn’t even that big, I was just buff.

“And so we went through that year, and we had a pretty good season, but my ankle was still messed up pretty bad. Then the next year the regular season started back up again. You know, when I was a senior. Most guys only play offense or they only play defense, but they had me playing both. And I was the main one in the . . .” I was cut off in my explanation by the sound of my ringtone.

The phone call was from my daughter. She explained that she had just been told my wife was going to have brain surgery to remove the bone flap on the right side of her skull.

My memory jumps to a few weeks after Lucy was admitted to a nursing home.

“I don’t want to stay here for an extended period of time,

Thurman,” Lucy softly whispered as she gripped my fingers with her left hand.

“You’re not going to stay here for a long time, honey. Look, you’re already improving.” I reassured her, squeezing her hand.

Finally, an announcement over the grocery store intercom rips me from my memories and I realize I have completed my shopping and am standing in the checkout line. I check my phone and a text message from my eldest daughter appears on the screen.

The previous hospital misdiagnosed Mom, she typed. Her twitching turned out to be to severe seizures. They think she might have suffered brain damage.

Whatever it takes for her to get better, I will do. I will do anything in my power for her. I hope my Lucy will be okay. My grandfather wiped the tears from under his eyes. He turned away from me and picked up his cane. He murmured a goodbye to my grandmother, Lucy, and promised to come back the next day. She didn’t reply, but the parts of our family who regularly spent time with her in the hospital knew that she wouldn’t. When he left the hospital room, I looked over at her frail form resting in the hospital bed. Tears dripped down my face faster than I could wipe them away. My heart felt like it was being crushed any my grandfather.s spoken thoughts echoed through my mind.

I hope my Lucy will be okay.

Me too, Grandpa, me too.

Aaliyah Jones

Memoir Star: Thurman Taylor

Memoir Title: My Lucy

Aaliyah Jones a fifteen-year-old junior at University Preparatory High School. She likes to read books in many genres and loves writing all the stories that just seem to pop into her head.