

First Place Winner

A REAL BEAUTY

By

Dallas Woodburn

The phone rings. Once. Twice. Then stops. After a brief silence, it rings again.

The signal. I quickly pick it up.

“Hi, Gramps! Had a feeling that was you.”

“Did you see it tonight?” he asks.

I gaze out the window at the fiery streaks of orange and crimson brushed across the sky, outstretched fingers gradually receding into the inky blackness. “Yeah, I sure did. It was a beauty, wasn’t it?”

“Certainly was. Yes indeed. A real beauty. It was almost as pretty as the sunrise. Did you see that gorgeous one this morning?”

I laugh. Gramps is the only person I know who brews his cup of coffee every morning to the sight of stars still dotting the California sky outside his kitchen window. He has the entire morning paper read and the crossword puzzle completed by the time the sun rises to greet the rest of us. I, on the other hand, have always been a late sleeper. Gramps knows this, yet he still always asks if I saw the sunrise. It has become something of a joke between us.

“No, gosh darn it! I missed it this morning,” I say dramatically. “I guess I forgot to set my alarm for 5:30 a.m.”

Gramps chuckles. “Yeah, well, you’re a young one yet. Still a teenager. Old people like me, we enjoy getting up early. It’s our nature. Just wait until your time comes, then you’ll see.”

“Yeah,” I say, though I’m not sure I do agree. Deep inside, I don’t really believe I’ll ever grow old. It’s too strange to think about. In my mind, I will always be young, strong, limber – full of life. Mom tells me all young people think they’re immortal. Then one day, she says, you wake up and suddenly realize that you’re not. It supposedly comes as a big shock.

“So, how was school today?” Gramps asks. “Did you get your history test back?”

“Yeah, I got an A on it.”

“That’s my girl!” he says, and proudly.

“Thanks, Gramps. I must have gotten my brains from you.”

“Aww, I don’t know about that,” he replies. “Though I was always pretty good at history. It used to be my favorite subject in school. Fascinating, fascinating stuff. You like it too, don’t you?”

“Yeah. But English is my favorite.”

“Oh, I knew that. You’re the writer in the family. Just like Auden. She used to be an English teacher, did I ever tell you that?”

No, he hasn’t. It’s amazing, really, how little I know about my grandmother. Gramps doesn’t talk about her too often. And when he does, I can never find the right thing to say to keep him going.

Like now. “Wow, Gramps, that’s really. . . that’s really neat,” I stammer, after a moment’s hesitation. I wish I had a way to let him know how much this tidbit of information about her means to me. A way to tell him that now, whenever I do my English homework – study new vocabulary words, or read Emily Dickinson, or write an essay on the themes of *To Kill a Mockingbird* – I will think of her and my ordinary homework will suddenly become magical. That now, every day when I’m sitting in second-period Honors English, I will try to imagine her up there writing on the board, teaching the class. That now, this part-of-me-that-was-once-a-part-of-her is almost sacred in my heart.

I wish I had a way to tell Gramps everything I’m thinking; a telepathic ray I could shoot from my mind to his. But I only have my own voice, and that is not nearly enough. So I just sit there, listening silently as Gramps goes on to describe the new high-tech KitchenAid mixer he bought at Kohl’s today. I swear, my grandfather is addicted to that store. Mom jokes we have to put him on “shopping probation.”

“Well, I just stopped by to check things out because today is Wednesday, you know,” he says. “And on Wednesdays they have a special senior citizen discount where all us old folks get fifteen percent off everything. Can you believe that? Fifteen percent off! I guess there are some perks to being an old guy like me, eh?”

“Yeah,” I say. “They give you discounts at Kohls and you get to wake up early every morning and see the sunrise.”

“It’s a good life,” he agrees. “It’d be perfect if Auden were still here, but at least I’ve got you, Dally.”

“Oh, you. . . you’ve always got me, Gramps.” I swallow. “Well, I should probably go. Homework to finish up.”

“Oh, yes, yes, you go right along now,” he says. It’s like I said I have to attend a meeting with the President of the United States. To Gramps, schoolwork is very important business.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I say.

“Okay. Listen, do you want me to call and wake you up in the morning? You know, so you can see the sunrise. It’s gonna be a beauty.” I can almost hear him smiling.

“No, no, it’s okay,” I say, laughing a little. This is the second part of our joke. He always ends our conversations with this same question, even though he knows what my answer will be.

“Oh, you young people,” he says with pretend exasperation. “Don’t know what you’re missing!”

“Well, you can describe it to me when I talk to you later,” I say. “I need my beauty sleep.”

I smile as he tells me I’m the last person in the world to need beauty sleep, just like he always does. One thing I love about grandparents is they make it seem like you are the most beautiful person in the world, simply because you are their grandchild and that’s what grandparents do.

“Goodnight,” I say. “Love and kisses.”

“Sleep tight,” he replies.

I hang up the phone, take one last look out my bedroom window. The night has devoured all remnants of the sunset now; the sky is an endless expanse of inky-blackness. Not even stars show their faces tonight. I catch a glimpse of my own reflection as I stare out the window. Who is that girl? Sometimes I have an almost out-of-body experience, where it feels like I am standing off to the side, looking at myself, wondering who that person

named Dallas Nicole is. I try to see myself as the kids at school do. *Oh, that's just Dallas, they would say. The quiet girl who sits by herself and reads all the time. She's really smart, you know. All she cares about is school.*

They do not know me at all. I am some other person around them, completely unlike the girl I am with Gramps. Sometimes it feels like I have a thousand different versions of myself floating around inside my soul. The trouble is, it's hard to tell which one is really me.

Who is that girl? The question hangs in the air, lingering like the last feeble rays of sunset. Then it, too, gets sucked up by blackness as I turn away from my half-reflection in the window. *Who is that girl?* I know the question-I-cannot-answer is not gone forever. Just like the sun will re-emerge in the morning, the question will also remain, lurking in the back of my mind to reappear another day.

I head over to my desk, dragging my feet along my room's vacuum-deprived carpet. I wasn't lying; I do have homework to finish up. Not English tonight, though. Math.

* * *

The few memories I have of my paternal grandmother are scattered and vague, like pieces of a puzzle that don't quite fit together. Me sneaking up behind her in the kitchen and untying her apron strings, and her whirling around, pretending to be angry, and chasing me with hugs and kisses. Me snuggling beside her on the big couch as she reads aloud Alice in Wonderland. She giving me crushed ice in a cup to chew on as I help her water the roses. One time the ice machine broke and ice splattered all over the kitchen floor. She just laughed and laughed, not angry in the least.

I'm not sure if these are actual memories or if they are just

stories I've heard and convinced myself that I remember. I don't care either way, because at least they're something to go along with the photos of her and the quilt she made that covers my bed. I use my imagination to fill in the blanks. Sometimes I go over the memories in my mind at night when I'm having trouble falling asleep. By now they are so vivid it's as if a tiny film strip is playing behind my eyelids.

I have this image of her in my mind. Bright red lipstick, short white curls, perfume smelling of roses and arms ready to envelope you in a hug. In my mind, she is always wearing a half-apron over a blue-checkered dress, and pearl earrings. She was very pretty. Miss America pretty, even. She was actually going to be in the pageant but dropped out to marry Gramps. He has a picture of her on their wedding day on the night-stand beside his bed.

I know that she loved bowling and was a great dancer. Her mashed potatoes were the best you've ever tasted, and she always made chocolate truffles covered in little chocolate sprinkles at Christmastime. Auden *loved* Christmas. Gramps would buy her one of those big white-flocked trees and she decorated it from trunk to tree-top, and below it she piled the tons and tons of presents she bought for all her children and grandchildren. She loved to shop for everyone but herself.

When I think of Christmas, that's what comes to mind. Chocolate truffles, a big white-flocked tree, and a mountain of brightly wrapped presents that soon became an even bigger mountain of wrapping paper. And she, beaming with joy, hugging everyone and taking pictures and bringing in fresh batches of truffles from the kitchen.

Christmas hasn't been the same since she died. We all still get together, exchange gifts, try to keep up the traditions, but there's a quiet loneliness underneath all the festivities. I attempted

to make chocolate truffles a few years ago, but they were a total disaster.

Now we just do without the truffles.

* * *

“Hey, Gramps.”

“Hi, pun’kin. Did you see the sunset tonight?”

“Yeah, it looked like the sky was on fire!”

Gramps loved my grandmother more than anything in the world. When cynics say that love isn’t real, that marriage can’t last, that it all just ends up in heartbreak, I think of Gramps and Auden and smile. They loved each other more and more with each passing day.

“So, how’d you do on that math test you were telling me about?”

“Fine. I got an A.”

“That’s my girl!”

They met in college on a blind date. He was a senior; she a sophomore. They were set up by a mutual friend, and went to a barn dance on Friday the Thirteenth. Gramps always says that superstition is just a bunch of baloney, because it was the luckiest day of his life.

It was love at first sight. They married and had three sons and a daughter. He took her out on “dates” often, and brought her flowers just because. Once the kids grew up and left home, they traveled quite a bit. Hawaii, Mexico, the Caribbean, even an

Alaskan cruise. The week she died, they had just returned from a trip to Boston.

“So, Gramps, it’s Wednesday. Did you go to Kohl’s?”

“You betcha! I found this ginchy jacket. It’s fleece, you know, really warm. Kinda like those they sell at Patagonia.”

“Sounds like you scored a good deal! Have you tried out your new mixer yet?”

“Oh, yeah, I used it to make mashed ’taters last night. . . . Never as good as your grandma’s were, though. She had a special touch.”

“Yeah.”

Auden thought she had the stomach flu the day she died. She was nauseated and very tired. The night before had been the forty-second anniversary of her and Gramps’ first date, and they went out to dinner to celebrate. She assumed she had just eaten some bad seafood.

I mean, she was only sixty years old. Who would imagine she was going to have a heart attack that night?

“Well, Gramps, I should probably go.”

“Yes, yes, get that homework done! Atta girl. Do you want me to call you in the morning in time to see the sunrise? I bet it’ll be a real beauty!”

“No, Gramps, it’s okay. You can just describe it to me when I talk to you later.”

“Alright. Hey, did I ever tell you, Dally, about your grandma being an early riser? She would have to wake *me* up to

see the sunrise.”

“No, Gramps, I . . . I never knew that.”

Sometime past midnight, my grandmother got out of bed to get an antacid. Gramps heard a *thud* and rushed over to see if she was okay.

She wasn't. Gramps gave her CPR and called 911, but it was too late. I can't even imagine what it must have been like. Gramps sitting beside her on the floor, staring at the love of his life who was suddenly gone forever. He, a veteran surgeon who has saved thousands of lives, not being able to do anything to save the one life that mattered most to him.

And downstairs on the kitchen table, sitting in a vase of water she had filled, the still-fresh rose he bought her on their first-date anniversary just a few days before. Gramps had that rose preserved and keeps it in a case on his night-stand, beside the picture of her on their wedding day. He sleeps with one of her sweaters under his pillow, because it still smells faintly of her perfume.

* * *

I open my eyes. It's still dark outside.

I've been tossing and turning all night – which is strange, because I rarely have trouble sleeping. I grope for my watch, press the “night vision” button. 5:47.

I sit up, turn on the light. For some reason I don't even feel tired. It's like I've switched bodies with Gramps or something. I wonder if I'm getting old.

Yanking up the blinds, I see the sun beginning to rise. I watch as the streaks of pink and purple slowly overcome the

darkness, waking up the world. A new day.

I check my watch again. October 15. And then I realize – today is the eleventh anniversary of her death.

I bet Gramps is sitting at his kitchen table, probably just finishing up his crossword. I picture him looking out the window at the now vibrant sky and thinking of her. This is the hardest day for him – no matter how many years pass, it doesn't get any easier. I wish I knew what to say, to let him know I understand, that I'm thinking of him and I'm sorry. And that I miss her too.

But it seems my voice is never enough. *Who is that girl?* I'm always scared I'll say the wrong thing.

I pick up the phone and dial. Though nothing I say will ever bring Auden back, at least Gramps will know I care. And I suppose it's better to care and say the wrong thing than to not say anything at all.

I let the phone ring once, twice, and hang up. I sit there in silence for a moment, fingering the quilt she made and blinking away tears. Then I take a deep breath and dial again.

He picks up on the next ring.

“Hi, Gramps.”

“Dally?”

“Yeah, it's me.” I take a breath. *Where do I go from here? What in the world am I supposed to do now?*

I gaze out the window at the streaks of red sunrise fading into day. And for once I know exactly what to say.

“I actually woke up early enough to see the sunrise this

morning, Gramps, can you believe it? And you're right – it sure is beautiful. Just like Auden. A real beauty.”

The End

Dallas Woodburn is the author of two collections of short stories and a forthcoming novel. She has written more than 80 articles for national publications including Family Circle, Writer's Digest, CO-ED, Justine, and The Los Angeles Times, and she writes a regular column for Listen magazine. Dallas is the founder of the nonprofit organization "Write On! For Literacy" that has donated nearly 11,000 new books to disadvantaged children. Her latest endeavor is starting a publishing company, Write On! Books, that publishes the work of young writers. In addition, she hosts frequent writing contests, teaches writing camps for kids, and is coordinator of the Young Writers Program at the Santa Barbara Writers Conference. Dallas graduated this past May from the University of Southern California with a B.A. in Creative Writing and Entrepreneurship. Contact her at www.writeonbooks.org or <http://dallaswoodburn.blogspot.com>.

Second Place Winner

THE LITTLE GIRL WHO COULD FLY

By

Lori Krause

Shy little Isabelle was a tiny eight-year-old girl who felt as though she didn't have a friend in the world. Aware of her red hair and freckled cheeks, she cautiously entered the second grade classroom. She was conscious of the creaking door as she opened it to enter the room and the noise her footsteps made as she walked across the polished tiled floor. She felt as though fourteen pairs of eyes were upon her, critical of her faded dress, scuffed shoes, and hair too curly to manage properly. Her knee socks were creeping down to her ankles like they always seemed to do no matter how many times she pulled them up, revealing her skinned shinbones that were covered with the scars of summer.

Miss Florence, the second grade teacher, turned from the chalkboard and glanced at the clock that hung above the door. Isabelle was ten minutes late and she kept her eyes cast down as she walked up to Miss Florence and handed her the new-student forms her father had filled out last night. She expected to be reprimanded for being tardy but Miss Florence just smiled and introduced her to the class.

“We have a new student with us this year,” she said to the rest of the class. “Let's all welcome Isabelle to the second grade.

Most of the girls looked at Isabelle in stony silence and some of the boys snickered. After all, this was second grade, and most friendships had been formed already in Kindergarten. They weren't sure they wanted any newcomers.

This was the fifth school Isabelle attended since she started Kindergarten. She and her Dad had moved from one town to another since her Mother died. Her Dad worked on various farms throughout Nebraska. Then, just when they thought they could stay in one place a little longer, the most devastating thing happened. Last summer a tornado destroyed their trailer home and they had to move again. This time they were living in a house that belonged to Mr. Maples, the owner of the farmland where her Dad worked. Her Dad was a strong worker and willing to do any kind of labor Mr. Maples asked him to do. He wanted this job to last so he and Isabelle would not have to move again anytime soon.

Miss Florence showed Isabelle to her desk. On it was her name printed in beautiful calligraphy. There were also two new pencils sharpened to a fine point, a box of crayons, and a folder with pictures on the cover of beautiful skies, clouds and birds flying. The folder contained lined and unlined paper on which to write and draw pictures. Isabelle was thrilled and thought perhaps this new venture would be okay.

The morning passed quite quickly and soon it was recess time. Out on the playground, Isabelle found herself to be the odd numbered girl, so she was left out of the friendship duos. Now there were nine girls and six boys in the second grade. She

wandered off to sit in the sun by the brick school building feeling very much alone. She watched the other children walk off in pairs, playing a game she didn't know. This was

not a new feeling for Isabelle, so at times like this she would sink into her own thoughts. She had a secret that she never told anyone, not even her Dad. And this secret made her eyes dance and made the corners of her mouth turn up into a sweet smile. You see, Isabelle had discovered that she could fly.

She realized this quite by accident one day when she was in Kindergarten. She didn't really like always being alone, but that's usually where she found herself. When the girls wouldn't play with her, or when they found out she couldn't swim, or was too shy to talk very much, they usually wandered away from her and she was left with just her own thoughts and dreams. At times like this she just wanted to get away and now, more and more, she realized she could lift herself up and fly. At first she barely could elevate herself off the ground, but each time she grew stronger.

Now as she sat alone in the warm sunshine, she closed her eyes and brought all her thoughts inside herself. She used all the energy she had to force these thoughts out of her mind except the thought about flying. It took all her strength and concentration. Isabelle felt all her power go into her arms and then her shoulders, and finally into her legs. Quite suddenly she felt herself moving. She forced herself to leave the ground. She felt so heavy at first that she didn't think she could do it but with great effort she pushed her body upward and found herself floating to the top of a big pine tree standing on the edge of the playground. She opened her eyes and was astonished to see how high she was. This was the farthest she had ever flown. How she wished she could share this feat with someone, but who would believe her?

She was just getting adjusted to her surroundings when she thought she heard someone call her name. She closed her eyes, and yes, she could definitely hear Miss Florence calling to her. "Isabelle, where are you? It's time to come back to class."

Before she could stop herself, Isabelle felt herself crashing back to

earth. She opened her eyes and there she was, once again in the sunshine by the side of the school building. She brushed any dirt off of herself and hurried into the classroom. Everyone was looking at her, wondering where she had been.

Miss Florence asked Isabelle if she could stay a few minutes after school and Isabelle gladly said yes. Her Dad would be in the fields picking corn for hours yet and she hated waiting for him in the house with the baby sitter, Mrs. Stearns.

As the school year progressed, Isabelle helped Miss Florence almost every day. Her Dad's job became permanent and Isabelle learned to overcome some of her shyness. Isabelle had grown to love her teacher because Miss Florence was so kind and good. Sometimes Miss Florence would fix Isabelle's hair with a pretty blue ribbon.

Isabelle decided she could talk to Miss Florence about her Mother, the little bit she could remember from what her dad told of her. Her Mother died when Isabelle was just three years old. There was one week of school left when Isabelle decided she knew Miss Florence well enough that she could tell her about flying. After school that day

Isabelle told Miss Florence in a very shy way about her flying and yet she made it sound very exciting. She waited anxiously for Miss Florence's reaction.

Miss Florence just looked at Isabelle with great love in her eyes. She kissed the top of Isabelle's curly little head and gave her a hug. Then Miss Florence walked quickly out of the room. Isabelle realized that Miss Florence didn't believe her! Isabelle grew very sad, then turned to the door and left for home.

She walked the short distance down the gravel road toward her house kicking the stones with such force it sent them sailing. "She

didn't believe me," Isabelle thought. "I must make her believe me!"

Mrs. Sterns would be waiting for her, but she sat down by the side of the road beneath a huge oak tree. It was cooler here and made her feel better. Isabelle looked up toward the blue sky. There were puffs of white and blue clouds hovering very near. The sun filtered through the leaves and she could hear the faint hum of bees gathering nectar from the wild flowers along the roadside. Isabelle closed her eyes and gathered all her strength inside her.

The next morning Isabelle skipped her way to school. She was early but she wanted to be, because she had a surprise for Miss Florence. Isabelle ran up the school steps and hurried into the second grade classroom. Miss Florence was already there working at her desk. She looked up and saw a beaming Isabelle. However, before Isabelle could say a word, Miss Florence took her by the hand and looked deep into her green eyes. "Isabelle," she said, "I love you very much, but you must promise me you will never talk about flying again."

"Oh no, Miss Florence," said Isabelle, "I won't talk about it. You see, next year I'll be nine years old and in third grade and everyone knows third graders are too big to fly." With that said, Isabelle handed Miss Florence a glass jar with a pink ribbon bow on top of the lid. Inside the jar was a little puff of blue.

Lori Krause lives in the small town of Elgin, NE and is a retired school secretary. She is married to Kenneth Krause and spends a lot of her time writing stories, poems and a bi-weekly column, Exhaling, for the local newspaper. She has placed in several writing contests and has had stories and poems published both locally and nationally. She also enjoys writing pieces for her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Third Place Winner

QUE SERA! SERA! (Whatever will be, will be!)

By

Phylis Warady

Que sera! Sera! had always been Molly's credo. But, sister or not, her patience was wearing thin. Her arthritic fingers itched to push aside the draperies and fling open the windows to let in sunlight and fresh air. Yet her nature was non-combative. So instead of confronting Fern, Molly clamped her hands over her ears to muffle the blaring TV.

Decibel count marginally lower, her other senses kicked in. The living room reeked of stale tobacco--thanks to Fern puffing away on a Marlboro. Bad for her health. But try and tell her that. Stubbed-out Marlboros overflowed all three ashtrays.

Max would have sent Fern packing. But Max was dead. It was up to Molly.

Inwardly quaking, she lumbered over to the set and lowered the volume. For a scant millisecond, pride in taking the initiative buoyed her up, but it withered in the wake of her sister's venomous stare.

"Turn that back up," Fern demanded. "I'm deaf as a post."

True. But give Fern an inch and she'd stake claim to the yardstick. "No. Turn up your hearing aid."

Her sister tapped a pudgy, nicotine-stained finger against a button-sized transistor embedded in one ear. "Blamed thing's been adjusted three times. Still doesn't work worth a darn."

"Suit yourself. But the volume stays down."

There! She'd actually stood up for herself. Max would be proud of her. So what if her insides quivered like those of a jellyfish.

"Well I never! Next thing I know you'll have me out in the street!"

"Never the street." Molly rushed on before she lost her nerve. "But I would like you to move."

"Move? Is this the thanks I get for giving up my apartment when Max died?"

Molly took a moment to marshal her forces. Fair was fair. This was her home—not Fern's. "I never asked you to give up your lease. If only you'd consulted me first."

"You'd just lost Max. My job was to comfort, not to burden you with *my* problems."

What a hypocrite Fern was! Taking advantage of her own sister's grief to sponge off her. Molly pressed her lips into a thin

line. Granted it took courage to be assertive in the face of her self-centered sibling's objections, but Molly was sick and tired of being overruled on her own turf.

"Fern, our temperaments clash. Besides, it's high time I stood on my own two feet."

Ignoring her sister's sputtering protests, Molly crossed to the front door. By the time she'd hobbled down the front porch steps and along the walk to her rose patch, she'd begun to hum snatches of a Brahms' concerto.

She knelt beside the picket fence. Determined to ignore pain shooting from swollen joints, she picked up a trowel and began to work the rich soil of the rose beds. The sun felt good on her bare arms. Molly smiled. She loved to garden.

A car engine decelerating shattered her peace. Peering between pickets, she recognized her niece's station wagon parked at the curb. Molly struggled to her feet. She brushed loose dirt from stiff kneecaps. The minute she passed through the gate, she sighted a spreading puddle on the asphalt beneath the wagon.

"Diane! Your car's sprung a leak."

Her niece stepped clear of the propped-up hatchback, a sack of groceries in each hand.

"Show me."

Molly pointed. "Directly below the hood. See it?"

Diane bent awkwardly, while struggling to hold the grocery sacks upright.

"Oh that! Harmless condensation. I had the air conditioner on."

Molly gave a relieved sigh. She'd worried it might be oil or transmission fluid.

By the time she'd managed to dodder from curb to kitchen, Diane had put away the groceries. She meant well but Molly would have preferred to do it. That way she'd know where things were. Still there was no sense telling Diane how she felt. She was almost as overbearing as her mother, Fern.

She watched Diane light a cigarette and take a long drag. Like Fern, she was a chain-smoker. Which was a pity. All the same, it was none of Molly's business. It was her niece's decision to make.

"Aunt Molly, I could hear your television set a block away?"

"Fern must have turned it back up. She claims her hearing aid is useless."

"Mom's too stubborn to give it a fair trial. You shouldn't let her walk all over you."

"I'm working on that."

Diane responded to her wry comment with a dismissive look that stung Molly's pride. She squared her shoulders. She was all through letting things slide. "That reminds me. . .did you get a chance to discuss inviting Fern to live with you and Bill?"

Diane took a deep pull on her cigarette, her flushed features a mixture of annoyance and guilt. "He's under a lot of pressure at work. Besides, Mom smokes and he's after me to quit."

Foisting her unwanted guest on Diane didn't look promising. What with Diane and Fern puffing away, the volume of second-hand smoke would be twice as lethal for Diane's kids. Molly gave an inward sigh.

"You should listen to Bill, dear."

Diane glanced at the wall clock. "Heavens! The time. I've got to get the ice cream into the freezer before it melts."

Her niece was almost through the archway before Molly thought to ask, "Where did you put my candy bar?"

Diane whirled around, a smug expression on her face. "I didn't buy it. Sweets are bad for seniors."

Molly somehow managed to maintain a reasonable tone. "Diane, indulging my sweet tooth on occasion can't hurt me."

"Aunt, if I buy you the chocolate you crave, I'm an enabler. What if you end up a diabetic? Do you think I want that on my conscience?"

Once in a blue moon, Molly craved chocolate, then appetite sated, could go without sweets for months. Besides, where did her niece, the chain smoker, get off monitoring her sugar intake?

"That's absurd. I'm in no danger of that."

"Maybe not. I'm taking no chances."

A loud pop startled them both.

"Sounds like a champagne cork," her niece called over her shoulder as she darted into the living room.

Molly lumbered after her, arriving in time to catch Fern fiddling with the knobs on the TV set. Molly cast a baleful eye at the dark screen, then sidled around to the back of the set and pulled the plug. Fern eyed her with suspicion.

"There may be an electrical short," Molly explained. "You'll have to do without television for a bit."

"Do without? It's Saturday. I'll miss movie of the week."

Molly hardened her heart. "Too bad. Weekend repairs cost extra."

Fern appealed to Diane. "How about inviting me home for the weekend?"

"Mom, weekends are the worst. The kids hog our set unless there's a game on, in which case, Bill does."

"That's right. I forgot."

Once Diane left, Fern wailed, "What am I to do with myself until Monday? Stare at a blank screen?"

Molly opened her mouth, intending to make clear she was in no rush to get the set fixed, but swiftly closed it. Fern was the consummate couch potato. She hated to play scrabble or cards. Nor did she like to listen to Molly's collection of classical records. What poor company she'd be moaning and groaning all weekend.

"Call the repairman. I'll pay for it," Fern said, breaking the impasse.

"All right," Molly agreed. "Just don't fiddle with it until it's fixed. It isn't safe."

In the kitchen Molly dialed TV repair. Chore completed, a mischievous grin lit her wrinkled face as she thumbed through the yellow pages.

A half-hour later, the front doorbell chimed. Minutes later, Fern poked her head inside the kitchen. "I thought it was the repairman but it's for you."

Molly signed for the box the deliveryman handed her. Back

inside the kitchen she lifted the lid and bent to savor the rich aroma of chocolate.

"Aunt Molly!"

Molly gave a startled jump. "Diane! I thought you went home."

"I did, then remembered I forgot to pick up a refill of your blood pressure medicine." Diane set the prescribed pills on the counter. "Where did you get that box of chocolates?"

"Western Union. It's a candygram."

Diane's flinty gaze caused Molly to take a backward step. "If you think I'll let you ruin your health, you're sadly mistaken!" She slapped the lid back on the candy box and scooped it off the table.

"Put that back. It's mine."

"No way. I'm doing this for your own good."

Diane's assumption she knew best made Molly seethe. "The minute you leave, I'll call and order another box."

"Over my dead body!" Diane slammed purse and candy box on the kitchen table and began to rummage through the drawers. Before Molly guessed what she was up to, her niece found the scissors she sought and cut the telephone wire.

Molly gasped. "What have you done? Without a phone, I can't summon help in an emergency?"

Her niece dropped the scissors, and with shaky hands, fumbled through her purse in search of a cigarette. She'd barely lit the tip when an explosion rocked the kitchen.

Seeing her own bewilderment mirrored in her niece's eyes, fear bubbles did cartwheels in the pit of Molly's stomach.

"Fern promised to wait for the repairman. You don't suppose?"

Diane's eyes filled with horror. Turning, she sprinted into the living room. Hobbling in her wake, Molly heard a tinkle of glass, followed by Fern's moan. But her view was blocked by Diane's back. Only when she drew parallel and caught a glimpse of the cowering young woman's immobile face did she realize her niece was in shock.

A second moan diverted her attention to her sister. Fern writhed on the carpet, a singed electrical cord clutched in her right hand. Tiny blisters dotting the skin of thumb and forefinger confirmed she'd stuck the now-melted plug back into the wall socket--triggering the explosion.

"I'll call 911," Molly said, then cast her niece a helpless look. "Dear God! I can't!"

Diane visibly pulled herself together. "Don't panic, Aunt! I'll go for help."

She dashed into the kitchen. Reappearing with car keys in one hand and the lit cigarette in the other, she raced out the front door.

Molly ambled after her, each step painful. From the front porch, her sharp gaze drank in every detail. Gate ajar, Diane took a last drag on her cigarette before flipping it onto the sidewalk.

Groaning with each step, Molly nudged the gate wide enough to glimpse Diane behind the steering wheel. Then, with a troubling sense of dread, she glanced down at the sidewalk seeking the tossed cigarette. Still rolling, it plunged off the curb into the gutter adjacent to the station wagon.

The revving engine drowned Molly's scream. A sudden whoosh sucked air from her lungs. The explosion rocked her. She would've toppled but for her viselike grip upon the gatepost. Molly stared at

the crackling ball of fire greedily consuming the station wagon. The puddle she'd seen earlier had not been harmless condensation. It'd been gasoline.

Dazed, she trudged back inside her house. Fern lay quiet. Her death, followed so quickly by Diane's, drained Molly. The entire episode seemed like a nightmare taking place in broad daylight.

Max was gone. It was up to Molly to handle things. Still it was quite a walk to the nearest phone. Particularly for an old lady partially crippled with arthritis. What she needed was an energy booster.

In the kitchen, Mollie popped a caramel coated with dark chocolate into her mouth. Savoring it, along with her new-found independence, she continued to ruminate. She'd warned them both. What more could she have done?

"Que sera! Sera!" She gave a fatalistic shrug. "Whatever will be, will be!"

The End

Phylis Warady's award-winning short stories, essays and light verse appear regularly in anthologies, literary journals and magazines in the USA and Canada. To stave off hunger pangs, she also writes historical novels set in Regency England. (1800-1820)