

VOLUME XI

WRITTEN TALES CHAPBOOK

Nostalgia:
Memories Never Forgotten

*STORIES & POEMS FROM
WRITERS AROUND THE GLOBE*

Written Tales Chapbook XI

Nostalgia

Edited by

Kevin Saitta



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Written Tales dedicates this volume to all the writers around the world.

Without you, books wouldn't exist. Literature magazines could never have seen the light of day. And poems, nonexistent. You're the reason we love to read and enjoy every word you pour out of your soul onto the blank page.

We thank you.

The Beginning of the End

Martha Macklin Blair

“I NEED A BONE MARROW TRANSPLANT,” HE HAD SAID ALMOST IN A whisper, into the small quiet living room where I sat wrapped in a clean bathrobe, no longer smelling like vomit.

Having heard him come through the back door a moment earlier, I looked up from the half-asleep baby boy in my arms. Propped against the low arm of the sofa, one leg outstretched to keep his twin brother from slipping to the wood floor, I found the eyes of my ridiculously beautiful husband. Usually sparkling with playfulness, I saw calm in them. I also saw worry in them.

Eddie had come around the corner from our tiny, narrow kitchen and sat down less than five feet away in a small dark blue chintz-covered club chair, it and its partner once in my grandmother’s Lake Forest home outside of Chicago. I had sat in them many times as a young child visiting her from Texas, in too-tight black patent leather Mary Janes, watching quietly, she and my parents’ sipping cocktails, usually gin and tonics. The pair of chairs were mine now, since that house was no longer in our family, our family that no longer included a living grandmother.

I smiled at him, “What does that mean?”

“It would take 3-months. I need to be at MD Anderson the whole time. They’re checking siblings to see if there is a match. If there isn’t, there’s an international donor registry they can check.” A registry less than a year old then, with less than 70,000 perspective donors offering their stem cells to strangers.

I matched his calm. Not because I had some mature wisdom to sense he needed it, but because I didn't know enough to feel anything else. "Ok, I'll pack up the boys and we'll all go. It's just three months."

I can do anything for three months, right?

I would find out how wrong I was in less than a week.

The next morning, I kissed Eddie softly. "We love you." I backed away only slightly to look into his crystal blue eyes. "I'll have us up there in a few days. Ok?"

"Ok. I love you too." He looked at his babies. "All three of you." He couldn't help but smile then. He had wanted a son more than he had wanted a cure for his cancer, and he had been given two. Neither of us could quite believe it still, six-months later.

"Bye." I whispered into the growing space between us, as he pulled out of our driveway and turned toward Houston. Holding both babies, I waved awkwardly. I never knew if he had looked back through the rearview mirror to see that I had walked out to the middle of Naples Street to watch him leave us. I imagine he did though. He would have done that sort of thing. And his heart would have been full around the fear.

"Say bye-bye to daddy." I said to my almost sleeping babies, one now needing a diaper change.

My dream was about to become something else entirely.

I wouldn't learn until many years later, Eddie had been to multiple doctor appointments and had received blood transfusions when I thought he was just at work those first months we were a family. The onset of this realization saddened me to think back and see he had gone through so much without telling me. Then I stopped and remembered him...the man he had been. He was a new husband who wouldn't have wanted to worry his new wife who had just become a new mom. It was just like him to carry himself through what I now refer to as 'the storm at sea,' leaving us safely on shore for as long as possible.

In 1978, home from Houston to visit his parents in Corpus Christi, Texas, Eddie told his father, a family-practice physician, that he'd been feeling tired for a while. Ben examined him and noted an enlarged spleen, sending him for bloodwork immediately.

Edwin 'Eddie' Benjamin Groner, Jr. was diagnosed with Chronic Myeloid Leukemia (CML) when he was 29-years old. Even with a great team of doctors and a fairly close family, the day-to-day course of the disease had been his to navigate alone those last 14-years. He would not know how to navigate the course as a husband though. And I would not know enough about myself, about being married, or about his illness to manage it any better.

Four days later, panicking as I stood in the rental office, I said with veiled calm, my heart rate high, "I've had to put foil cups of liquid soap under the legs of my babies' cribs to keep the roaches and silverfish from crawling on them while they sleep."

Do not cry, Martha. Do not cry. Do not cry.

Exhausted from rigging a U-Haul to my black Ford Explorer, loading it with two cribs, bouncy chairs, strollers, toys, needed pots and pans, dishes, bottles and bibs, rattles, diapers, building blocks, and things I no longer remember, I willed myself not to burst into a flood of tears after a night of sitting on the floor between cribs, trying to stay awake. Trying to keep my babies from being crawled on and bitten by bugs in the night.

Have you ever walked into a darkened space and tried to see? It takes a few seconds before you can make things out like shapes or movements. Now imagine quietly walking over to your sleeping baby, able to make out their precious shape on top of the crisp white crib sheet when something else catches your eye. It's small so you're not quite sure you're really seeing it as your vision focuses. Maybe you have a piece of lint in your eye that moves when your eyeball moves. But no, there is no lint. Something is whipping back and forth as it crawls towards your unsuspecting baby and your reflex is to grab it and fling it across the room with such unmeasured might it will surely explode against the wall. It doesn't of course. It lands somewhere and crawls away...or back towards your baby.

“Please, I need to move to a different unit. Do you have another one I can get into today?”

“Not on the ground floor. No. I don’t think so.” Said the unapologetic girl-in-her-20’s slouching on the other side of an oversized, fake dark wood desk with matching 1980’s credenza behind her. Her name plate read Cindy. Cindy seemed tired of this job. Her laissez-faire attitude wasn’t willing or didn’t have the skills to grasp my desperation. I wanted to shake her free from her too tightly buttoned synthetic blue blouse with boobs wanting to burst free.

Before I had a chance to lurch across her desk, she said, “We do have someone moving out this weekend. It would take 3-days to clean it.” Her life was spared.

This cannot be real. I don’t think I can have my children in that roach infested apartment another night.

“Alright. Thank you. But there are silver fish and roaches climbing the walls and into my babies’ cribs. Can you please get an exterminator in there today?” The tears were threatening to crest the dam. I needed to get out. I needed to sign the transfer-lease and get the hell out. I needed to get back to the boys before they woke from their nap.

What nightmare am I in?

Fianlly unlocking the door to the apartment, I had listened for cries. Gratefully hearing none I allowed myself the freedom to slide down the back of the door I’d closed behind me as if in a theatrical production and burst into very quiet tears.

Oh my god! How do I do this? How the fuck do I do this?

As it turned out in the end, I didn’t do very well. This admission is not voiced in hopes of garnering any sort of sympathy. The truth is I did not do a very good job finding a footing in our unimaginable story as it began this new chapter of hell. I was not prepared...for marriage, for motherhood, and most certainly not for being a new mom with a dying husband I’d only met three years earlier.

Slipping away far too early were dreams of laughter, tenderness, and most importantly emotional, and physical safety, a commodity I was just getting used to. It took almost thirty years to understand, that this place in our story was the beginning of my grieving for what lay ahead, and for what would now not lay ahead. This was the beginning of our end. ¹

In Conversation with Martha Macklin Blair: The Beginning of the End

Your story recounts the moment when your husband shared his need for a bone marrow transplant. It's a powerful and personal moment. Could you describe how this revelation impacted you, both in the immediate and larger context of your life and relationship?

Eddie told me he was sick 3-weeks after we met. He had had leukemia for fourteen years by then. He was Christopher Reeve-handsome and ran every morning. He did not look or act ill. This story began six months after my emergency C-section, and I did not have the capacity to grasp what lay before us. I was naïve to all of it. And so, in my ignorance, I was not impacted by it immediately except to problem-solve. Eddie needed to get to Houston to survive, so that's what would happen. We had just become the family I'd dreamt of, which meant we would be traversing this together...without question. But what I would be traversing, I could not even begin to imagine because I had absolutely no context for it. It did not occur to me he would die in a year. He told me we probably had ten. It did not occur to me that I would raise our children alone. I went in blind, yes, but I did go in head held high. Ultimately, that determination is what kept me from drowning, I think. Even in the dark of the night when weeping was all I could manage.

The description of the room and the chairs passed down from your grandmother adds depth to the scene. How does your choice of setting and the symbolic meaning of these chairs contribute to the emotional weight of the story?

The choice of setting was made by Eddie when he sat down that morning, no longer able to keep our lives to himself. The chairs have always symbolized happy memories with a woman I didn't know for nearly long enough. In my grandmother's presence, I felt safe and adored even though I only saw her twice a year. She was everything good and sweet to me. I only realized how astonishing this was after becoming a grandmother myself.

I have sat in those chairs as a young woman, a new mom, and now also as Grandma Mackie, and fondly remembered her heart for me, wanting to be her for my own precious grandchildren.

Family and its evolution play a significant role in your narrative. Can you elaborate on how family dynamics, especially the loss of your grandmother, are intertwined with the challenges your family faced due to your husband's illness?

My grandmother died unexpectedly while I was away at camp the summer I turned thirteen, and my mother would not allow me to go to her funeral. The grief I carry for her is a complicated grief because I was never allowed to say goodbye. We must be able to say goodbye. I had not known seven months earlier that when she hugged me goodbye after our Christmas visit, it would be the last time I would feel her strength surround me. Her death, the first of four that would test my spirit, left me untethered, aimless, hungry for that kind of love...unconditional.

Between visits to my grandmother, I began to dream. I knew if I could just grow up, I could have my own children and be loved like she loved me. My grandmother showed me what I knew innately I should feel from a mother. And so, I dreamt of this dream family for years and years. And long after friends had married, when I had almost given up, I found this marvelous man who looked deeply into me as if I were his own soul. The warmth he gave filled all the broken places. We made each other laugh every day. Like giddy teenagers, we hurriedly planned our family. He knew he was dying, and I knew we wouldn't grow old together but more than those things we wanted a child. And then there were two. I was finally a mom, who would someday be the kind of grandmother mine had been. I would pour love over my children's children, like too much chocolate sauce over vanilla ice cream. I would give what she freely gave...without condition.

Writing about personal trials can be therapeutic, and it can also inspire readers facing similar challenges. What message or insight do you hope readers take away from your story, especially those who might be going through their own life-altering events?

I have kept journals since they were called diaries and came with inadequate locks. When we tug our thoughts free and move them through our hands onto paper or screen, it codifies what spins in our minds, often allowing for understanding or insight in the doing of it. This exercise, especially during a time of crisis, can be crucial to finding footing and sanity when all seems insane.

One of the reasons I became an End of Life doula was to be for others who Eddie and I did not have. Eddie and I, not knowing how to stay afloat, gave way to the terror and lost who we were as it thrashed us around in the storm of terminal illness. There was no one there to help him know how to die and no one there to teach me how to help him die. Regret should not be a companion to grief. This is not the space for martyrdom. This is when you call in the troops. This is when you courageously announce you cannot do this alone.

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Final Comments

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Thank you,

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