

Pen & Ink Writers' Group

The truth is...we gather on the Third Monday of each month to practice our writing skills. We listen and share in each other's work. We are small in number and our commitment is strictly to produce and foster creativity among our members.

We started in July 1999 and consist of adults that enjoy writing memoirs, commentaries, essays, poems, and/or prose. Our simple method each month is to use a pre-selected word or phrase as the basis of a story, an idea, an opinion, a derivative of, or an implied essence of and write a 1 to 1 ½ page document. We share our stories, comment, and in that way build up our writing skills through practice and presentation. The atmosphere is friendly and supportive, and the feedback is gentle.

Curious? Always wanted to try writing for fun, entertainment, or even profit? Come visit with us at any of our open meetings. Bring a sample of your work. Sit in and see what we do. If you like it, join us every month and become a member.

Original Works by Members of the Pen & Ink Writers' Group © 2014 Pen & Ink Writers' Group

December 2014 selection – Sparkle/Sparkling

Sparkle By Valerie Collins

She gazed out of eyes that had witnessed a lifetime. Eyes that she knew no longer had the sparkle of youth nor even the twinkle that comes from years filled with tumbling memories of every color and hue. The passing of time loomed over her and enveloped her in darkness. Now in the autumn of her life, fast approaching winter, she had much to reflect upon, ponder and recollect.

Her life was comfortable enough. She lived in a small cozy cottage in an old New England town not far from the ocean. She followed her sister here many years ago after their parents died and they could no longer take care of the large estate on their own as they were getting on in years. Her sister and brother in law liked the ambiance of this quaint town and so indeed did the woman. Each sister lived in separate cottages but within walking distance from one another. Having lost her husband, which seemed a lifetime ago, she wanted to remain close to her sister who she loved dearly. For many years this living arrangement was satisfactory and indeed quite pleasant. Small town life agreed with the woman and she stayed active and involved in the community. Now these many years later her friends and acquaintances were old and had either moved away or died. This is the sad reality of aging. Sadness visited her once again when her dear sister and brother in law were suddenly and tragically killed in an auto accident, leaving the woman so very alone in the world.

Now on this particular winter night the woman sat in her favorite stuffed chair next to the warm fireplace. It was a good spot to wander through the years of long ago and retrieve sweet memories. As the memories filled her mind she realized what she missed the most. It was the sparkle that had been in her life. Oh she saw the glitter of the holiday lights dancing through the town and the shining lamps through village windows. She watched the fireplace spark up in lively flame and the streetlights glow with effervescence. But the sparkle that had filled her heart when loved ones were near, when life was shared with those she held dear, was missing. Life went on around her, everyone bustling with his or her own agendas and really not having time to bother with an old woman. That was it she thought. I miss the sparkle, the joy.

As the woman reflected on these things she saw a streak flash outside by her window. Now alert, she peered through the window to find an answer to this vision. Her eyes met the dark night and nothing more. Retreating back to her chair, she settled down in comfort. It wasn't long before she heard a sound. What was that? A rustling? A crunching? Now a tiny voice was heard, soft and gentle. Overcome with curiosity, the woman opened the door to peer outside in hope of solving this little mystery when there on her doorstep was a kitten all black with streaks of white across its soft fur. Delighted she scooped it up to bring inside out of the cold. Sitting down in her chair by the warm fireplace the kitten, already snuggled in her lap, began to purr. The woman's heart melted and at the same time filled with affection and love for this small creature. Well now she said out loud to her new charge. You are exactly what I need and I believe I am exactly what you need too! The kitten rubbed the woman's hand with her little head and purred all the louder. I have just the name for you she exclaimed. I will call you Sparkle!

###

Miracle of the Sparkle
By Susan J. Wilfong

The eyes with which I view this world,
Have changed a lot, it's true.
I'm sure you can say the very same thing,
Of the eyes that you have too.

I used to greet each day with a smile,
I'd think about where I would play.
I didn't have to punch a time card,
Or sign out at the end of the day.

Those pretty yellow flowers,
I picked with tender loving care.
Are now dandelions and weeds,
I wish were simply not there.

Not too long ago, it seems,
People respected each other.
It didn't matter who they were,
We considered them sister or brother.

A child's imagination is a marvelous thing,
I hope this gift never expires.
But if we use our imagination, as adults,
We may be referred to, as liars.

I see the pain this world is in,
How danger is all around us.
The empty, frightened, stares of friends,
Forever will surround us.

The innocent sparkle in a child's eye,
I can no longer claim as my own.
The sparkle has been replaced, I fear,
By an angry, cynical, drone.

Because I have seen, with the sparkle in my eye,
And because I have seen as the drone.
Daily, I ask the Mighty Lord,
To never leave me alone.

Since the day I asked the Lord for help,
I see things in a new light.
I view this world with compassion and fear,
For God's will, people seem to have lost sight.

The sparkle in my eye, has definitely returned,
My heart is now filled with love.
I know that these two miracles,
Have come from Heaven above.

###

'Tis the Season to Sparkle
By Carol Karvon

“‘Tis The Season to Sparkle” read a magazine ad for a glitzy sequined sweater. Even before she saw the ad Linda knew it was going to be a sparkling holiday. She could just tell. The nights had gotten cold and crisp. The newly fallen snow had a sparkle to it. It glimmered in the moonlight. Oh, yes, it was going to be a good Christmas this year. Not that she was expecting any expensive presents or having any expectations of what the

season would bring. It was mostly this light hearted feeling she was having.

Linda worked for a distribution center and it was always very busy at this time of the year. All the holiday gift orders had to be shipped and delivered a few days before Christmas. Customers had been ordering large quantities of the special holiday packages. The company was guaranteeing delivery before Christmas and waiving any shipping charges. Linda herself was ordering something for each of her friends and relatives — from scented candles to the bigger, more costly food and wine baskets. She had to be careful not to get carried away and overspend on her credit card. Everything was so appealing this time of the year and she loved buying gifts. She really loved seeing the surprise on people's faces when they opened the gifts she'd chosen just for them.

Lately she had been in a happy mood. John had come into her life a few months ago and they planned to visit each of their families over the holidays. A mutual friend finally succeeded in getting them together after several months of urging them to meet. Linda and John had both been stung by blind dates in the past and didn't trust the opinions of their well-meaning friends.

They thought they met accidentally at the friend's home. Little did they know at the time that she hadn't told either of them the other one was coming. By the time they found out, it was too late. They were "in like" — not "love," at least not yet or not that they would admit — maybe soon. Like was good. Like was friendship and camaraderie. Like was sharing good times. So right now everything sparkled for Linda.

She didn't know John was having similar feelings — like he was walking on air these days. Friends were asking him why he was smiling and happy. All he knew was he couldn't wait to talk to or see Linda. John even thought her eyes sparkled. This was going to be a good Christmas after all for him too.

John and Linda did their Christmas shopping together, but each going in separate directions in the stores. She couldn't decide what to get for John and thought she'd try to feel him out for hints. John was having the same problem finding Linda a gift. It had to be just right, but not too personal or expensive. It had to be perfect, just like Linda.

Linda found a rare vintage book about pirates. She knew John loved the ancient mariner tales of piracy on the high seas. She might even add a bottle of rum, an eye patch and maybe a buccaneer's hat for a touch of whimsy, if she could find one.

All John could think of for Linda was a string of pearls. He found the perfect string. It wasn't too long, but each bead was perfectly round and luminous. These will look beautiful on Linda, thought John and bought them for her.

Each was lost in their thoughts on the way home and secretly pleased with the choices they made. Wrapping the gifts was all that was left to do. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve and they would exchange gifts then and wish each other a Merry Christmas. The first of many yet to come, they each hoped.

###

A Star Filled Night

By N. Stewart

The stars are out tonight, shining and sparkling in the sky. The air is cool, but comfortable, and the light from the campfire is slowly fading. We're sitting just enjoying the peace and quiet of nature while listening to the night sounds in the woods. Chipmunks are chirping, an owl hooted, critters scurried over the ground. The tent is set up. The sleeping bags are unrolled. This certainly is a different way of spending Christmas Eve than we have ever done. No last minute wrapping of packages, no food to prepare for tomorrow's dinner, and no other place where we have to be.

Early in the day, we had packed up the kids for a surprise trip and drove out to the country. At first, Janie was a little upset that she would miss seeing her little friends at the Christmas play that afternoon at school. Bobby kept asking how Santa would be able to find him here in the middle of nowhere.

There was a small fir tree near where we had located our tent. I had brought pop corn to string, ribbon, scissors, and different colors of construction paper to shape into ornaments. Once done, we decorated the little tree while singing *O Christmas Tree* and other favorite Christmas songs. On the top of the tree, a small paper angel cutout was placed.

As the day turned to night, Dad pointed to a star in the east and began to tell the story of the birth of Jesus as the kids, covered with blankets cuddled around us listening. As the story progressed, the kids were enraptured and their little faces were aglow and their eyes sparkled. Getting sleepy, it was time to wander into the tent where we hugged each other tightly and together sang Silent Night. Bobby begged us, asking again how Santa would ever find him. After reassuring him that presents weren't the only meaning of Christmas, we all said good night, tucking ourselves into our individual sleeping bags. Dad said he needed to tend the fire and would be back shortly. Soon everyone fell asleep.

The next morning, Bobby was up and out of the tent before we could stop him. "Everyone come," he yelled, "look at this." Around the little decorated tree were a small number of presents. Janie and Bobby tore into theirs. Janie hugged her new doll. "Wow, Santa found us," Bobby exclaimed holding up his new catcher's mitt. "This is like the best Christmas ever." We all had to agree it was the best Christmas, but each had received so much more than a present left under the tree.

The kids played, after a prayer of Thanksgiving for all that we have, we ate our picnic-style Christmas dinner, and soon it was time to pack our things. We said goodbye to the little tree and to the country, climbing into the car. Before too long, the kids were asleep in the back seat. Dave squeezed my hand and whispered, "I love you." I squeezed his back. It had been a truly wonderful Christmas.

###

Like a Gust of Wind
By Phyllis Babbs

Christmas will never be the same without Linda. She had a child's wonderment and awe of the holiday that didn't diminish with the passing of years. When you were with her, the feeling was contagious and no military invasion was as carefully planned as was one of Linda's Christmases.

The day after Thanksgiving, the decorations were put up. The theme and color varied every few years. Each gift was carefully selected and painstakingly wrapped. The Christmas cards she sent were always symbolic of her philosophy of life. Great care was given to the holiday menus and the selection of cookies.

When her mother began to bake, Linda would call me up and invite me over for warm cookies and tea. The warm cookies would somehow transform us into children again. At Linda's bidding I would weigh and shake her presents, trying to guess what lay hidden in the silent boxes.

There are two Christmases that stand out in my mind. One is the year she called me to say that we were going to make place cards for the Little Brothers of the Poor. She admired their work with the elderly and homebound and she helped them however she could. But when she told me we were going to make 2,000 place cards, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. She said "You're so good at organizing. We'll get them done in time."

It was a labor-intensive project. First the place cards had to be made which meant measuring, cutting and then folding pieces of poster board. On the left-hand corner would be a bright green felt Christmas tree with a brown felt tree trunk, more cutting. The tree and trunk were glued onto the place cards and then the tree was decorated with colorful, sparkling sequins. Added to the top of each tree was a gold star. On the right side *Merry Christmas* was written in red ink. We needed all the help we could get and coaxed everybody we knew into working with us. We did get them finished on time and they really were lovely. When the place cards were all boxed and ready to go, I was warmed by the thought of 2,000 smiling faces. Just a piece of poster board, swatches of felt and lots of love but then love was something Linda was an expert on.

My family began its holiday celebration by going to Linda's house early Christmas Eve and exchanging presents. The last Christmas we shared, Linda gave me a silver bowl piled with homemade goodies. I was concerned about the amount of money she had spent. "Linda, you shouldn't have done this!"

"Well, it's partly for your silver wedding anniversary."

I reminded her that anniversary was a few years away but she held my attention with a look. "I want you to have it now," she said in a gentle but firm voice.

I looked at that familiar face with the holiday lights reflected in her brown eyes. She was reminding me her time on earth was limited. It took me a minute to swallow the lump that was making my throat ache, "Thank you, I'll enjoy it." Two months later Linda was dead.

I knew she could die at any time but letting go was much harder than I had thought. We had known each other since grammar school. When she contracted polio, many of our school friends abandoned her. But I had made a silent vow of "until death us do part."

We shared part of every day. There were times when we were sisters; times when she was my child and times when she was my mother. Her death left a big hole in my heart. But I was relieved she was gone, whole again, able to walk, run, and swim, to be able to move on her own, to breathe on her own. Polio had kept her chained to her bed for over twenty-six years, six years longer than the doctors had thought possible.

After Linda's death, I put the silver bowl away, high on a closet shelf, out of sight, out of reach. I became like that silver bowl, an unreachable empty vessel.

Then one day, as I was putting the laundry away, I thought I saw this little banner move, a banner Linda had given me. It's a small red cloth banner; a black tree with white hearts hanging from its branches. In black ink it reads "Like a gust of wind, a friendship has shaken me." And I felt the air move. I remembered the times when I was reluctant to accept a challenge and Linda would say to me "You have to do it, for the both of us." Those words rang in my ears. Now the challenge I faced was to move forward, carrying her spirit with me.

I took the silver bowl out of the closet, polished it and put it on the dining room table. The warm glow reminded me of Christmas and of the times Linda and I shared warm cookies. The reflections made me think of the times I saw the holiday lights reflected in her eyes. And I opened my heart again.

No, Christmas will never be the same without Linda but "a friendship has shaken me" and that continues to be my Christmas blessing.

###

Sparkle
By Sara Schupack

She had passed up tinsel, lights, even eggnog. It was way too rich and she'd end up drinking too much and feeling sick and then sick of herself. Christmas had come and gone. What to do to make New Year's Eve sparkle? Or did it have to? It was just her and

her girl cat named George. Rhonda had considered going to a nice restaurant, or even a bar and just ordering one fancy drink with pretty colors. But that just seemed too pathetic. She didn't care that much about appearances anymore, but she couldn't bare the thought of the solicitous, pitying looks she'd get from servers or other patrons, smug in their coupled or family status.

Rhonda had her chicken pot pie that she loved, and a small carton of espresso chip chocolate ice cream. She would enjoy herself. She wouldn't wallow. She might watch the sci fi series she was into, binge on a whole season, or curl up with the hefty historical fiction, which was really just a romance novel dressed up in some classy settings and language from the previous century.

She only felt bad when she pictured someone else watching her from the outside. What a terribly lonely lady, with no friends or family on a holiday, shuffling around her house trying to keep cheery. A sad lady, with her cat. But she didn't envy the bickering couples or the big, loud families with grudges and grabby kids. She liked her quiet home. She sat with her pre-dinner crackers and cheese, a nice glass of red wine, and George curled up on her lap. She started with the newspaper, and then thought, who was she fooling? She turned on the screen and started her sci fi series early. She didn't need to impress anyone. She hadn't gotten out of her sweat pants all day. She was cozy and content.

Somewhere into episode 5, George left her lap. Rhonda wasn't paying attention. Then she heard that awful hacking noise, like an angry grunt pulled backwards up a vacuum. Throw up. Yuck. That was something that did not bring her cheer on this self-made holiday. After trudging down to the basement for a new roll of paper towel, Rhonda had to chuckle to herself at the brand name. "Sparkle." So she did have some sparkle after all, on New Year's Eve.

###

Wild City of Ants
By Jim Smetana

I was eating the last of the Count Chocula when Marge walked in and sat down with a sense of finality. "I've had it with the Billys", she said. "Yeah, I know what you mean," I said, "the Billys has done lost they spark". Sometimes without realizing it I talk like a Negro sharecropper from the Mississippi delta. Lawd, lawd. I remember when we first started "The Night of 1000 Billys." We didn't know what we were doing and that's what made it fun. We just made it up as we went along. There were no rules so how could we break them? Ask Marge to show you the Scrapbook of Memories someday if you want to see something amusing. Who could forget the time we turned the ceiling fan into a meat slicer? Dario Argento would have been proud! Or the time Minnie Driver showed up uninvited--no one even knew who she was! I've got to think we kept it going as long as we have as a kind of homage or tribute to dear Uncle Billy. It might be time to hang it up though--let's face it Marge and I are losing our mojo. I was hoping the twins would take it over but they have their own lives: Karl's a cheese monger and Kevin plays trombone

in a funk band. Uncle Billy never missed one even after his demise. That was the year I had my friends from The Casbah cater the whole affair. I tried to keep Uncle Billy's remains in his lovely blue vase out of harm's way but once the exotic food hit the table Rolf unstopped Billy and gave him a few good shakes into a bowl of lentil soup. "I don't know what this is, but it's WONDERFUL!" he said. (That's exactly the way he talks.) He passed Uncle Billy off to Contest Man who shook him onto a lamb dish then to Tom Karabatsas, then to Phil, then to Fred, then to Pat Cooper then to that Serbian girl--when he finally got around the table near enough so that I could grab him and save what was left, OF COURSE he goes back the way he came to Pat Cooper, to Fred, to Phil to Tom Karabatsas and then finally to Contest Man who gave the lovely blue vase a couple of good hard slaps. "Well," he announced, "that takes care of that!"

###

Christmas Poem
By Stephanie A. Tonn

The sparkling lights on the Christmas tree,
Glisten for everyone to see.

At the top of the Christmas tree the star shines bright.
In the night it is the brightest light.

On Christmas Eve night a mother and father tuck their children to sleep,
Hoping not to hear a peep.

The snow sparkles like a morning dove,
On Christmas day, spreading love.

Grandparents hug their grandchildren with sparkling faces,
As they travel with their family to familiar places.

While the parents cook,
Children read a book.

The Christmas carols sang by grandfather always brings sparkling cheer,
For his family each year to hear.

###

Yes, Virginia
By Vicki Elberfeld

My loss of innocence had nothing to do with sex. I don't remember it all, but it took place in our dark car in our dark driveway, the neighborhood illuminated by only a few Christmas lights. I asked my mother a question that had been festering in my mind for a long time. It didn't exactly upset me, but I felt some urgency about getting an answer.

"Mom, how can Santa visit every single house in the whole world in only one night?"

Mother overestimated me. She always overestimated my poor brain's ability to figure things out, and this caused problems for us on many occasions. On this particular one, she said too much, answering a question I hadn't asked.

"You guessed it!" she said. "I always knew this day would come. Of course no man in a red suit could make it to every single household in every single country, let alone in one night. It's your dad and I...well, the parents who actually deliver the Christmas toys."

I picked it up quickly after that. "So...the Easter Bunny...?"

"Yes, him too, but don't you dare tell your brother!"

Later on, "And the tooth fairy? You mean you put the sparkling glitter and the shiny quarters under my pillow?" And then, in a rush of anger and hurt, "Noooooooo," I moaned. "Why did you have to tell me?" the consequences of this knowledge only now beginning to sink in.

"But I thought you, knew," my clueless mother went on. "When you asked me your question, I was sure you had it all figured out."

I loved Santa Claus. He was a hard worker, along with his helpers, and he always represented such generosity and abundance. He was fat and jolly, shod in sturdy boots and sporting warm and colorful clothing. In exchange for a letter and milk and cookies, he left you wonderful presents. Why, oh why, did Mother have to kill him off?

I hated writing, but I never hated writing to Santa. There was such a freedom in asking for anything I desired. No, he didn't bring me everything I dreamed of, but he always brought more toys than I could play with in a day and included his own surprises too. He came through better than my teachers, doctors, and parents, only now he was my parents.

And here's where the problems came in. I could ask Santa for anything and if he couldn't manage a certain toy for me, he'd be OK and his feelings wouldn't be hurt. But now I'd just be asking my mom and dad. I knew they didn't have all the money in the world - although it was exciting to know that my father had built my dollhouse himself with the help of my uncle — so now I'd have to be careful about what I asked for. Santa was cool: he expected kids to want things, and it was his job to please them, but I didn't want my

parents to feel bad about all the things they couldn't afford. My kid brother was so lucky — he could cheerfully write his Santa letters and not be burdened with this horrible knowledge.

Time passed and I adjusted to the news, of course. What else could I do? I thought of that dollhouse and all its rooms and furniture carefully and lovingly made by my dad. I thought of the colored bells I received one Christmas, each one ringing a different tone, so I could chime out an entire carol with them. I thought of the look of shock and outrage on Dad's face the year I received my so-called Santa-delivered chemistry set which didn't have any gunpowder, so I couldn't blow anything up, the main reason I wanted this particular gift. Dad seemed much more upset than I was, but then he was always such a talented actor. And I came to realize that my dolls Tressy and Chatty Cathy weren't made in a workshop but bought in a store by two parents engaged in creating a beautiful fantasy for their children.

So, yes, Virginia. He may not wear a red suit or race through the world in a sleigh, but there certainly is a Santa Claus.

###

There are Many Sparkles in Life
By Elvira K. Castillo

There are many sparkles in our life if you stop and think about it. At this time of year, during the month of December, the first sparkles that come to mind are the sparkling lights of Christmas trees and homes decorated with shiny bright lights and ornamentations. December also brings us snow that sparkles like diamonds in the evening when the street lights shine on the white blankets. Frosty windows become creative designs and sparkle in the evening, too, with the light of the moon and street lights. And, let's not forget the three wise men following the sparkling star in the East, guiding them to the birth place of the Prince of Peace, Jesus. Personally, I recall a pleasant memory of my Mother and me sitting at the dining room table by the potbelly stove, making sparkling Christmas wreath pins and earrings comprised of sequins and beads.

Romantically speaking, there's nothing like a sparkling diamond engagement ring and the sparkle and joy in the eyes of the recipient. Champaign with sparkling bubbles might be consumed to celebrate this occasion, while having your romantic dinner by the sparkling glow of candles. And, speaking of candles, we all enjoy blowing out the sparkling candles on our birthday cakes.

Of course, 4th of July is another sparkling time of the year with all the fireworks. Myself, I prefer watching it all on the television, but when I was a child, the neighborhood kids enjoyed seeing the fireworks outside under the beautiful dark blue sky full of sparkling stars. My older brother, Marvin, liked fire crackers, but I preferred "Sparklers," which you lit and held in your hand with your arm extended, so as not to allow the sparkling "Sparkler" to touch your skin or clothing. Today, the neighborhood fireworks are more

noise than sparkle, and the dark blue sky no longer exists due to light pollution. You can't even see the beautiful sparkling stars any more, unless you go out to wide open spaces where the city lights don't pollute the sky. We're lucky we can still see the moon!

I guess I could go on further with sparkling ideas, but I think I've used the word "sparkle" enough, so I'll conclude this adventure with the latest very competitive sparkling creation on television. It's the very, very sparkling Mirror Ball Trophy presented to the winner on "Dancing with the Stars." The celebrities competing for this trophy practically kill themselves learning difficult dances each week, often in pain and agony from injuries. The winner this year said he waited ten years for his shot at this magnificent sparkling trophy ball. It is amazing to me what the celebrities and professional dancers go through and accomplish each week. Whoever wins certainly deserves the Mirror Ball Trophy award. It is a beautiful trophy, and I'm sure whenever they look at it, they will always remember what it took to win this "sparkling award."