

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 © 2015 Pen & Ink Writers' Group

March 2015 selection – Answer(s)

We Never Know All the Answers By Elvira K. Castillo

I read somewhere that someone said it takes a lifetime to grow up and we probably never will know the answers to everything no matter how grown up we are. I say "Amen" to that, although in our world today many teenagers think they know the answers to everything. They're in a world of their own. From what I've seen of young people and know of teens in my family, they have little respect for their parents, don't think their parents know anything and either have their own answers to everything or simply don't care about answers. They're too busy with their faces in IPADS, cell phones, etc. There's simply no verbal communication between parents and children.

I admit when I was a young girl growing up in a single parent household, I, too, often did not feel my Mom had the answers to many things or knew anything, but at least we communicated whether we agreed or not. I also admit that I did love and respect my Mom, and didn't want to do anything to lose her respect for me. In fact, I was sometimes afraid to do anything to make her angry or upset.

As many of us have to admit, as we grew older, more experienced, and had a few ups and downs, we realized that our parents or parent may not have been so wrong in their advice or answers. A couple of warnings or words of wisdom from my Mom, which I did not heed to when I was young, were regarding sunbathing and smoking. In the 1950s suntans were very popular, and I loved to get nice and tan to go with my blonde hair. Of course, I'd usually burn first and then turn tan. One time I had a red bathing suit and I got so burned, I was as red as the suit. Well, Mom warned me about skin cancer

because she knew someone who died from skin cancer. I don't think I tanned in the sun a lot, but still I did get skin cancer, and have had many cancers removed. Today, I regularly go to the skin doctor for check ups and had two cancers removed just last year.

As regards to smoking, I didn't start this until I began working. Many of my peers smoked and it seemed to be the classy thing to do, plus my best beau smoked. Mom's warning about this was close to home, because my Dad smoked at a young age, and when he developed Berger's disease, which is poor circulation, he was advised to quit smoking immediately. He did quit immediately, but he eventually had both legs amputated and died at age 52 years. I actually only smoked about a pack a week for maybe three years before I quit, but am very glad I did. Now I cannot stand the smell of cigarette smoking and can smell it a mile away. So far, I've had no bad results from smoking, but again, Mom was right! I did, however, lose a very dear friend to lung cancer. He had quit smoking for many years, but guess the damage was done.

If we knew the answers to everything, we wouldn't make any mistakes. However, if we learn nothing from our mistakes, guess we haven't found any answers either.

###

The Kiss **By Vicki Elberfeld**

I dream myself a fairy princess - with long blond hair flowing all the way down to the floor and beyond, so far beyond that it spills onto a white satin train held aloft and carried by six serving maids, ladies who take turns brushing it out daily until it is tangle free and gleams in the sunlight.

Today is special; I am meeting my betrothed for the very first time. What will he be like? I'd heard he was a fierce dragon slayer and possessed gold and riches beyond compare, but that is all I know. Suppose his warrior nature supersedes that of the lover? Suppose he spends his days hunting, fighting, slaying and his nights drinking and carousing? He could be cold; he could be cruel; he could be ugly.

I put on my favorite gown, pale green to set off my hair, richly embroidered in gold and silver, pearls, and precious gems, and hope for the best.

My ladies accompany me to the throne room. Father greets me with a kiss on the cheek; mother casts me a smile, her eyes reflecting the anxiety in my own.

The moment has come. Trumpets sound, the bridge is lowered over the moat, and hoof beats echo through the walls. An eternity while the men dismount. The door is opened and a tall, dark man in dashing black cape enters followed by ten servants. He bows before my father, tips his feathered, velvet cap to my mother, and turns to me. I am nearsighted and do not see him until he is almost upon me. Humbly, he kneels to kiss my hand and looks up into my eyes. His charming smile reveals an ever so slightly crooked tooth. His smoldering eyes are filled with passion and laughter and love as they devour my every feature. I am lost in those eyes as I feel his warm lips caress my own, and I faint dead away.

Fortunately I come to before anyone musses my hair. When I return to my beloved's eyes, I see them filled with tender sympathy. I know he will be a loving husband and affectionate father...

...but it doesn't happen that way. I am sixteen, wearing a sleeveless, blue, cotton sundress with a picture of a juicy watermelon on the front. My eyes and shoulder length hair are brown; my skin is tanned. I am at a German picnic in the woods near my home. My parents are with some friends in the food tent, and I have a couple of hours to explore on my own. The tent with the oompah band seems the most promising. I listen to the lyrics "in heaven there is no beer. That's why we drink it here," and I laugh. Imagine being so fond of that foul smelling beverage as to regret its loss in the afterlife.

Elderly couples dance a vigorous polka, while others, not so elderly, seem to be barely dancing at all. Ein bisschen blau, a little bit tipsy, their only aim is to retain an upright posture as they cling to each other and sway from side to side. Whether it is the beer or the wine or the music or simply the good fellowship, everyone seems to be smiling. I am feeling rather left out for I don't know a soul and I desperately, I mean desperately, want to dance.

Just as I decide to die if someone doesn't ask me to dance within the next minute, a tall fellow stops by my table and offers to buy me a beer. I tell him I'm too young to drink. He offers me a cigarette, and I explain I don't smoke, hoping all the while he doesn't leave. He's square-jawed, blue-eyed, blond, and extremely good looking. Finally, finally he asks me to dance, and we enjoy an unusually wild polka. He lacks the vigor of the elderly couples however, is winded already and wants to stop. Fortunately the band moves on to a waltz which he figures he can handle. The problem is he holds me too close, and he cannot quite match his rhythm to that of the musicians.

I don't mind terribly. I suspect he has been trying all evening to get in enough beer before he dies, and I just can't understand how a beverage that smells so bad in the cup can smell so good on him. I am building up a sweat from even a little dancing in that crowded place and worry that I'll smell bad; when he buys himself another beer, I let him buy me one so I'll smell better. I drink some and gag. He raises his eyebrows and asks, "You don't smoke, you don't drink, what do you do?" I babble on about my high school classes until I see he is plainly bored.

He looks to be in his mid twenties, and my conversation disappoints him. I, on the other hand, could listen to him for hours; he has such a charming accent.

"Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" he asks. My baffled expression disappoints him again. I feel sad because I like him .and want him to like me I like his smell, his looks, his kindness in dancing with me when no one else had offered. I like him for being German. I had never been in a forest full of Germans before; I love their vigorous language and dancing; I love their boisterous good spirits. I make plans right, then and there to learn the language, visit Germany and maybe even live there some day.

His offer of a walk' snaps me back to the present; I am relieved. Now, perhaps, we won't have to talk. He puts his arm around my shoulders; I feel protected as we walk out of the tent.

'He talks about his life in Germany, but I'm too 'distracted to listen. We are walking into the trees, away from the public area, and I'm afraid my parents will worry if our walk goes on too long. Suddenly, he stops talking, leans over, and kisses me right on the mouth. Though startled, I enjoy his lips on mine, his hair brushing my face. His beery

smell is even more enticing close up. Just when I think we've set some kind of record for length of kiss, something very peculiar happens. I feel this long, slimy and downright gooey thing fall into my mouth and I can't manage to spit it out and I don't know what it is and when I finally do figure it out, I leap back in horror, covering my mouth with my hand. Yuck!!! What was his tongue doing in my mouth for goodness sakes? I wonder if it happened because of the beer. I'd heard alcohol could make a person loose in the tongue, and I guess that's what happened. I don't feel angry because it really isn't his fault, but I'm terribly embarrassed for him. Imagine not having your tongue under voluntary control and having something like that happen!

He doesn't seem embarrassed at all but gets that disappointed look again. "I asked you before, 'you don't smoke, you don't drink, what do you do? Und you didn't answer.'

He's beginning to irritate me. "I do lots of things, fun things, things you wouldn't begin to understand, but if I don't like something, I just...well...I just spit it out," and I run to find my parents.

###

Why? By Phyllis Babbs

The Coptic priest and I met at the Laundromat. Little did I know that it would be the beginning of a friendship. We talked about religion and he told me his wife and daughter would be arriving in a few weeks from Egypt. And then he invited me to attend mass and met his family.

Meeting a priest's wife was a new experience for me. The priest's wife's name was Hoda and I liked her immediately. She had a warm, gentle aura. And unique calm. Her eyes really were the window to her soul.

Parishioners gathered around her after mass, so I left quietly. But once home, I felt strong desire to know more about this woman. I did some reporting for a local newspaper and I thought Hoda would make an interesting article. So I grab my notebook and pen and headed back to the church.

When I found Hoda and told her what my intentions were, she seemed pleased. As she led me to a corner for privacy, she introduced me to a professor from the University of Chicago and his wife. The wife said "Oh, how wonderful! Madam is being interviewed!"

Having been a Navy wife at one time, I wondered how she had dealt with the absence of her husband. She explained to me she had her work as a teacher and her children and her sisters. "Well, not sister by birth. But all the women in my life are my sisters." Then she stopped talking and looked at me with these piercing eyes. "Would you like to be my sister?" There was no way I could refuse the invitation.

In Egypt, Hoda's job had been to teach Arabic to English speaking people working in that country. Then I became her pupil. We had dinner at each other's houses. Our daughters went roller skating. My husband gave her daughter her first snow mobile ride. We became family.

We had invited them over for dinner on a Tuesday night but then Hoda called to reschedule. Their Bishop was coming for a visit. Could we get together the next week? It

sounded like a good idea as I had wanted to paint the dining room. It gave me the time and motivation to complete the task.

On that Tuesday evening, my husband and I went to get more paint. The church parking was full as we drove by. And I recognized vehicles that had come Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa. "They are having a good turnout for the Bishop," I commented.

The phone was ringing when I opened the back door. It was Lucy. She hesitated "Phyllis, you didn't say anything today. I was wondering. Did you know the Coptic priest died of a heart attack Sunday?"

Sirens had been blowing during the parade on Sunday but I had heard one siren I understood it was for someone in trouble and had said a quick prayer.

I just hung up the phone and ran out of the house. "Clifford. Oh my God. Father Bishay is dead! I have to get to Hoda!" I told him what happened as we drove. There was a crowd in the parking lot when we got the church and it was like the parting of the Red Sea when I got out of the car. Murmurs of "The American is here" filled the air. A man I knew came up to me "We have been trying to call you!" And then he showed me a piece of paper. Hoda had transposed the last two digits of our phone number which they couldn't reach me.

"Hoda?"

"She's gone. She will write you."

"I'll go to the airport!"

"No, the plane has left. Come and meet our Bishop. He would be honored to meet you. He knows about you and how you welcomed us to your community and your sisterhood with Hoda."

Wisps of hair escaped the bandana on my head. My face and clothes were painted speckled and paint was hardening around my edges of finger nails. "Oh, no. I can't meet your Bishop like this. I feel that I would be dishonoring him by doing that. I just can't."

Then this group of people comforted me the best they could. A people, a Christian people who lived their lives as truly Christian as it is possible to be. Kind, gentle, loving people who shared what they had with each other and people they met.

When I heard about the Coptics who were recently killed, it was hard for me to believe. Until that happened, what was going on in the Middle East was just news being reported. But now it was very personal for me. I knew these people across the ocean. How could anyone kill such gentle people? Why did this happen? And this time I want an answer to my question,

###

The Answer to the 20Q Game

I purchased one of those 20Q computerized games at a garage sale a couple of years ago. For no known reason I didn't get around to trying it out until yesterday, and I suspect I might have gotten a defective copy. First of all, I decided to fool with it, giving answers to its questions that were just a little bit not true. And, by the way, my answer was me.

The first question it asked was, "Is it bigger than a breadbox?" I answered *No*, on account of I decided that my breadbox would be a bit large, being about the size of a coffin. I figured that'd screw the thing up from the get-go. "Is it animal, vegetable, or mineral?" I answered that straight, being the animal that I am.

"Would you find it in a zoo?" I naturally answered *Yes* because I frequently frequent zoological gardens. I figured that wasn't too much of a stretch. "Can you sit on it without causing irreparable harm?" I'm trying to envision myself sitting upon myself and deciding how much damage would be done. I gave this a *Yes*.

"Could it ride on a plane at regular fare?" This should have been a resounding *Yes*, I guess, except that I am very fearful of flying, regardless of the fare. And so I ended up answering *No*. "Would it be likely to take part in overthrowing a government?" Well, that did it; for sure I had a defective game. No self-respecting game would dare ask such a ridiculous question. I gave this a resounding *No*.

"Can it swim?" How to answer this? I could swim if I knew how, of course, but in fact I never took it upon myself to acquire that particular ability. In any case, I answered *Yes*. "Does it weigh more than a goat?" I went and looked up what a goat weighs and was given figures ranging from 45 pounds to 300 pounds. So the obvious answer is *Yes & No*. I flipped a coin and answered *No*. I don't know why.

"Can it tell time?" Another preposterous question. I have frequently wondered, as my musings go, if you could talk to time, what would you tell it? "Please slow down," perhaps. Or, "Why don't you take a break?" Time wouldn't do any of these things, of course, but it's fun to speculate. My *Yes* answer was what you would expect, I guess. "Is it more intelligent than a border collie?" I looked this up, too, and discovered that border collies are perhaps the smartest dogs you could ever hope for. Well, I am not the smartest people you could ever hope for. Therefore I naturally gave as my answer *No*.

Well, eventually we got through the entire 20 questions; it seemed to take an eternity, though. And the game thing came up with an answer that I'm not sure I entirely agree with, but whatever will be will be, as they say. The answer that scrolled across the game cube screen was, "It was you yourself all along, you insufferable ass, and I figured it out despite your frequently misleading answers. You should be ashamed of yourself!" That's not exactly what you would expect to come out of a silly hand-held artificial intelligence game. But immediately after it put forth that astonishing answer, it got smoky and flew away into some alien transport vehicle. I'm never going back to that garage sale. The people there did seem a bit strange, now that I think about it. But I am strange, too, so what does it matter? Answer me that!

Answer:
by: Susan J Wilfong

I have a zillion questions
Racing in my head.
They never seem to take a break
Even when I go to bed.

Who? What? Where?
When? How? Why?
They seem like they are mocking me
As they continue to race by.

Sue, why did you do that?
Was there something else I should have done?
Why are you being so lazy?
Get up and have some fun?

I'm really not that motivated,
To start my household chores.
I'd rather be in the backyard,
Or any where out doors.

So, here sneaks in another question,
Why don't you cut the grass?
The answer is very obvious to me.
I have simply run out of gas.

No, not the lawn mower
You see, that is running fine.
It me that has run out of gas
And yet I continue to whine.

I wish I had some answers
To those questions inside my head.
I wish I could make them stop,
Whenever I go to bed.

Questions are not bad things
For they encourage us to grow.
It's tiring, searching for the answers
To the things we just don't know.

I would really be miserable
If every answer I would already know.
Life would be extremely boring.
There would be nowhere I'd want to go.

I am satisfied with my life
The zillion questions and all.
I'll continue to search for answers
And pick myself up when I fall

###

The Answer is in the Truth
By N. Stewart

“Hi Mom, I’m home.”

He said, rushing to get passed her.

(Hmm... that smells like he was smoking) “Bobby wait a minute. Can we talk?”

“Sure, Mom, in a second. Gotta go to the bathroom.”

“No, I need to talk to you now.” *(Oh, my gosh he’s only 12. Stay calm perhaps there is a reasonable explanation for that smell on his clothes.)*

“What is it?” asked Bobby all too innocently.

“I smelled cigarette smoke on you when you came in just now. I wanted to know if you have been smoking. Before you answer let me remind you, tell me the truth and you live to play another day or lie and you lose the use of all electronic gadgets, including the TV, iPod, Cell phone, iPad, computer except for doing homework, XBOX and whatever else requires battery power to work. So what is your answer?”

“Well...um...I...um...,” Bobby said, squirming and stammering.

“Take your time and think about it. Have you been smoking?” *(I can’t believe I’m hoping that it is old-fashioned cigarette smoke and not something far worse like pot.)*

“I’m sorry Mom. I... It’s not my fault. I didn’t do anything. He took some cigarettes from his father’s pack and we hid in the car in his garage and lit them. I only took one puff, honest, maybe two and pretended the rest of the time. I really didn’t like the taste and I got a funny feeling, kinda sick to my stomach and dizzy. I know, I know. You told me not to be pressured into trying things, but I didn’t want to be the only one not doing it.”

(I hope it made him feel really sick) “Are you feeling better now? Who got the cigarettes? Who else was there?” she inquired.

“Mom, I can’t tell you. I’m no snitch. You’ll go to their mothers and...”

“Tell me or I pull the plug forever.” *(If only that could happen)*

“Frank and Johnny were there,” said Bobby with his head hanging down. Charlie got cigarettes from his father’s pack. I didn’t want to...I didn’t know how to say no.”

(Oh, my poor baby) “Okay, I’m glad you told me the truth even though you weren’t able to tell your friends how you felt. *(Don’t cave in. There has to be a consequence for smoking in here somewhere.)* I won’t take away your electronic toys because you told me the truth, but I hope you understand that there will be a punishment for the smoking. We’ll talk about it later and together we can decide what it should be. And, yes I will be calling their mothers. *(You’ll be angry with me for a few days, but you’ll get over it. I will, too.)* Go to your room and study. But, wash your hands and change your clothes first. *(You really do reek.)*

“Yes, Ma’am,” said Bobby as he slowly climbed the stairs to his room.

“Bobby, I love you,” she called after him and smiled. *(He’s a good kid and it is difficult to be growing up in the world we live in. Maybe I’ll bake him some chocolate chip cookies for when we talk.)*

###

Answers **By Sara Schupack**

Rhonda watched all of her friends abuzz with teenage curiosity. Love, power, sex, drugs, fame, music – who had them, how did you get them, how much did you want them? Some of the deeper, more introspective sorts wondered about the meaning of life. But Rhonda didn’t wonder. She didn’t care. She hated herself for not caring, but it all seemed so futile to her. She saw that for the lively kids around her, the questions mattered more than the answers. It was the collective wondering, the guesses and gossip and puzzling, one question leading to another, flavored with just the right amount of teen cynicism.

She hated sitting stiffly through her mother’s stories about her younger years, being talked about in nostalgic terms -- with the implication of course that who she was now was nothing much to talk about – oh, when little Rhonda was only 10, or 6, or 3, she used to say the cutest things. In her preschool years, she asked ‘why’ so often it wore her mother out, says Mom, but with a fond giggle. “My little philosopher.” Back then, she supposed the craving was for answers, not just the questions. A little person, observing

the bigger people all around her who knew things and could do things, the power, the independence, that that knowledge seemed to bring. She must have hungered for it. Now she wished she hungered for anything. Was she turning into her mother? She shuddered at the thought.

Her mom would shut down, sometimes for several days, saying, "It's nothing to do with you. I'm just having my bad days." And while she knew her mother was just trying to protect her, to make sure she didn't see the withdrawal as anger or criticism directed at her, it hurt almost more to be shut out so entirely, to be told that her mother felt things that were so separate from her that she was irrelevant. That also made her helpless in the face of her mother's dark retreat from life.

During the dark days, Rhonda would be extra efficient and businesslike, getting the meals together and inviting her mother, knowing she'd decline, completing all homework, feeding Props, the cat, even tidying her room a bit (mainly by shoving piles of dirty clothes or old schoolwork out of sight). Was this effort to remind her mother that the world kept going and she was welcome back whenever she was ready, or was it a fervent attempt to remind herself that Rhonda wasn't her mother?

Her mother clearly worried too. Whenever Rhonda seemed blue or lethargic or not so successful in school, her mom would seek out yet another therapist. Rhonda knew about that confidentiality rule, so she'd just make up stuff to sound as confident and well adjusted as she could. She'd ask innocently about exercises and vitamins to recommend, as she knew teens tended to get tired easily and need a lot of sleep. She did not mention her secret junk TV binges at around 2 to 4 in the morning most nights when she couldn't sleep. She did not mention her lack of caring for anything, except those dumb shows, with the obvious, exchangeable sets and canned laugh tracks. She never laughed along, but was somehow comforted by the mechanized enjoyment to accompany the predictable storylines.

Rhonda didn't like the way people looked at her, or didn't look. Their gaze seemed to slide right past her as if she wasn't worth their attention, or else they'd narrow their eyes and quickly look away, as if disappointed but trying politely to hide it. She didn't like her own reflection, especially the times when her face looked frozen like her mother's mask of apathy, and when she felt there was nothing of interest there. She used to find the quaint expression from historical novels silly: "plain". How could a face be plain? Some faces were more beautiful than others, but all faces were interesting. Until she started to feel nothing and see nothing in her own face. Then she avoided mirrors.

She started not only not to feel emotions, but not to feel sensations. She'd be sitting in her room, listening to music, reading homework, and lose track of what that sound was, what was the paper object open in her lap, what was that warm weight on her? That was the worst, her best companion, Props, being demoted to a vague weight. Her mother's voice started to sound as if it was coming from under water, and then she felt terrible, because there were fewer and fewer times when they could have a conversation that didn't end in

some misunderstanding and hurt, and that was when they weren't passing through the house in silence, like grieving ghosts.

Rhonda went through the steps of living, but felt reduced to some sort of simple geometry of shapes and volumes. She hated geometry. She cut herself a few times, just to feel something, but hated being a cliché as well. A teenage girl cutter. The fact that there was even a noun for it now bothered her. Besides, so what? She felt pain for a few hours, and a dull reminder for a few days, but what of it?

She must have looked quite bad or behaved, perhaps like a mental patient on slowing meds, for her mother looked more and more concerned, and said one Saturday morning with way too much cheer, "I think we two need a fun vacation. Let's do it. Next week."