

## 2ND PLACE — NON-FICTION

# I Just Want to Know

by Patricia Herchuk Sheehy

My husband says that when I die my headstone will read: she just wanted to know. He's right. I do just want to know. I'm always questioning, always asking, always seeking answers to the unanswerable. Like, What happens when we die? Is it simply all over? Or do we exist in some afterlife, strolling along a place called Karmic Boulevard, waiting for the right time to reach out to our loved ones, maybe even planning a comeback? It's one thing to have these questions on some esoteric level for intellectual discourse. It's another thing to have them because there's a hole in your heart and all you want to do is hear, one more time, from the people you've loved and lost. That's where I was at when the calls started to come.

There's no linear way to tell this story. So, instead, I will tell it to you as though we are sitting together at the kitchen table, enjoying a cup of morning coffee or, if you prefer, that afternoon glass of wine. I will tell it to you in a way that makes sense to me, and you will see how the universe has, in a small and very personal way, responded to my need for answers.

The first thing to tell you is this: our daughter has died and the pain of it is still raw. On February 5, 2012, at precisely 12:08 a.m., we were sitting with Patty in the bedroom that once held her teenage dreams, stroking her sweat-soaked hair, listening to the "death rattle" Hospice warned us about, when she gave up the fight and took her last breath. Diagnosed just six weeks earlier, at age 51, with Stage IV pancreatic cancer, the doctors said it would be fast and brutal. And it was. One minute we were planning her wedding, the next her funeral, with no time to process; there was only time to react, to do what needed to be done in service to the one who is dying, nursing day and night, praying for her relief, praying for her survival, praying for answers to the unanswerable.

Patty was my stepdaughter, with the same name as me — Patricia Ann — a name my husband loved before we ever met. Within months of our marrying, a rebellious thirteen-year-old Patty (and her fourteen-year-old sister, Ann) moved in with us. There they were, daughters of my heart, challenging this new bride to suddenly be a new mother. Together, we forged a family. It's here in our home that we hold the memories of our efforts, of their proms and parties, of report cards and boyfriends, and, now, of Patty's excruciating journey into death.

For all of our years together, Patty and I had a private greeting whenever we phoned each other. It went like this: "Hi Patricia, it's Patricia." A simple phrase. Nothing special in the eyes of the world. And yet, to us, invisible glue within the texture of our relationship. Planting flowers at the cemetery a few months after her death, I told

Ann how much I missed Patty's voice. How much I missed our silly, decades-old greeting.

Hold these thoughts and travel with me, now, back in time . . .

Shortly after my dad died — twenty-five years ago, at the age of 66 — I wrote an essay for our morning paper, admitting that I needed to know where my father might be — see, there's that need to know thing again — how much I wanted a phone call from him, telling me he's doing okay, maybe even making plans to see me again. I so wanted that call. For days after the piece was published, I received calls from strangers offering to share their faith and insights, their version of the Truth, including one from a man who introduced himself as "Elvis, no relation, Presley." But nothing from my dad. Not then anyway.

Fast forward to Thanksgiving 2010: I was cooking dinner and missing my mother terribly. She'd died a few years before, right around Thanksgiving, after a series of strokes over several years. I basted the turkey, went upstairs to take a shower and the phone rang. The elderly, female voice on the other end said exactly this: "This is your mother. Do you need any help?" Not a simple, "hi" or "how are you?" but, "this is your mother." She was calling her daughter and dialed incorrectly. Or did she? That was call Number One.

Three days later, my cell phone rang. I rarely use my pay-as-you go phone. Few people have the number. I turn it on only when I'm on the road. Apparently I'd forgotten to turn it off after traveling to a book signing the night before. I raced toward the unfamiliar sound and answered without putting on my glasses to see who was calling. The man on the other end said, "You sound better today."

"Who's this?" I asked.

"This is your father. You sound better. I'm glad."

Hmmm. It took 25 years to get that call. But it came.

Now, back to the beginning of this story. To our daughter Patty's death and my overwhelming need to hear from her. To feel connected. To hear our private greeting one more time. A few days after planting those flowers at her grave, I came home to a voice message from a woman I'd been e-mailing. Patty DiFazio and I were finalizing a date for me to attend her upcoming book club meeting. Instead of e-mailing this time, she decided to call. And this is what she said: "Hi Patricia, it's Patricia."

This woman didn't know me. Didn't know my history. My sorrow. My deepest need. Yet there it was: "Hi Patricia, it's Patricia."

Call Number Three. Simply coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not. Some call it synchronicity. Others call it angel tracks. I call it an answer to my deepest need, a message from the invisible world, letting me know there is something more. For now, that's all I need to know.

1ST PLACE — POETRY

## The Bridge

by Joan Heller Winokur

*Today I take the road that runs alongside  
the river.  
Park at the base of the bridge.  
Mist thick as flannel. I can barely see the opposite bank.  
I can barely see.*

*The river courses  
with the force of a burst water main not caring  
about anything in its path, not caring  
that it took your nothing-daunts-me smile.  
The river has its confidence-killers currents,  
hidden rocks, deep beds.*

*They found pieces of your boat not you.*

*I climb the steel.  
The river is shrouded in grey.  
In its bed, your laugh.*

2ND PLACE — POETRY  

## Study in Gray

  
by Mary Beth Lundgren

*Gray, singularity among colors, appears nowhere on a wheel  
but has an achromatic scale of a hundred shades  
that open a mote darker than white; end a fleck lighter than black.*

*Taste that bottle of Goose in your freezer-  
its bite and a bit of smoke unlock memories of gray:  
Playing golf in wispy fog that floated over the valley course at dawn.  
That year when smog, heavy as a wooly mammoth, smothered the city.  
Brakes screeched, traffic stopped as wildfire leapt the highway inches away.  
Heady aroma of tobacco trailing us home from that cigar bar near the river.*

*Gray's textures range from silky — talc-smooth ash that fills an urn —  
to rugged: Think custom-tailored business suit  
with strength to shatter ceiling glass.*

*Listen to Lady Gray croon the blues  
when sleep turns us down,  
loss descending in darkness.  
A phantom tabby, fearful of strangers, she bums tunelessly,  
slips shadow to shadow  
in glimmers of a new-minted moon.*

*Gray, at her most powerful,  
inhabits that ground between right/wrong, yes/no, and black/white.  
Gray embodies free will, its essence, its truth, and its soul.*

*Like homespun cloth, soft and shy,  
gray never screams, shouts, or laughs aloud.  
Occasionally though, at dusk, she perches in an oak tree,  
side-by-side with an owl  
and whispers,  
"Why? Why me?"*

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW ELIAS

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2ND PLACE — FICTION

# Love in the Lily Pond

by Carmine Lombardo

*F*owdy, my name is Professor Barnyard Wise. I was born and bred in these Tennessee hills, and I'm the only owl on ol' Mr. Bates' farm. Good ol' Mr. Bates loves animals, his land and his family. Why, he's got more wisdom than a heap of folks with all their learnin'.

I just love his son, Teddy, cause he's just like his dad. You can see him here fishin' in that ol' pond Mr. Bates had dug out for the cows. That's where our story begins.

One day I was flyin' around takin' in some of the beautiful scenery when I see these two country boys, Wart and Freddy, mozeyin' down the path. They must've been laughin' 'bout somethin' cause Wart was practically bendin' over.

Suddenly Freddy stopped. He popped his big ol' brown frog eyes and stood fixed like a Greek statue.

"Golly, what's happenin' to you, Freddy?" yelled Wart.

"You goin' crazy or somethin'?"

"Shh," replied Freddy. "Don't you hear it?"

"Hear what?" asked Wart.

"That song! That voice!"

"Oh, that! It ain't nothin' but some ol' fat frog croakin' somewhere." exclaimed Wart.

"Now wait a minute, Wart. I knows what I hears, and what I hears is beautiful, simply beautiful, and what's singin' it 's got to be the same. Come on! Let's see where it's comin' from.

"Oh, all right if'n that'll please ya," grumbled Wart.

So Freddy and Wart jumped off the road into the nearby bushes and made their way toward the pond.

Well, don't you know, there on the other side of the pond was the prettiest little frog ever to sit on a lily pad singin' so sweetly I thought Freddy was goin' to melt. Not far above her, on a long branch of an ol' hickory tree, Benny and Bertha Bluejay were busy carin' for their young uns.

Freddy's eyes rolled back, his heart started pumpin' like a hammer poundin' on an anvil while his jaw dropped like a bale of hay thrown from the loft of ol' farmer Bates' barn.

"I've just got to have her, Wart," Freddy moaned. and holdin' his stomach as if he had cramps, he swooned "She's sooo purty. Why, I think I'm fallin' in love."

"Love?" cried Wart. "You just sees her and you're in love?"

Now love is great, but sometimes it don't come easy. I guess ol' Freddy didn't notice that lurkin' behind one of the big rocks around the pond, slithered Slinknaster, a nasty, mean-ol'-frog-eatin snake figurin' how he was gonna get two frogs for the price of one.

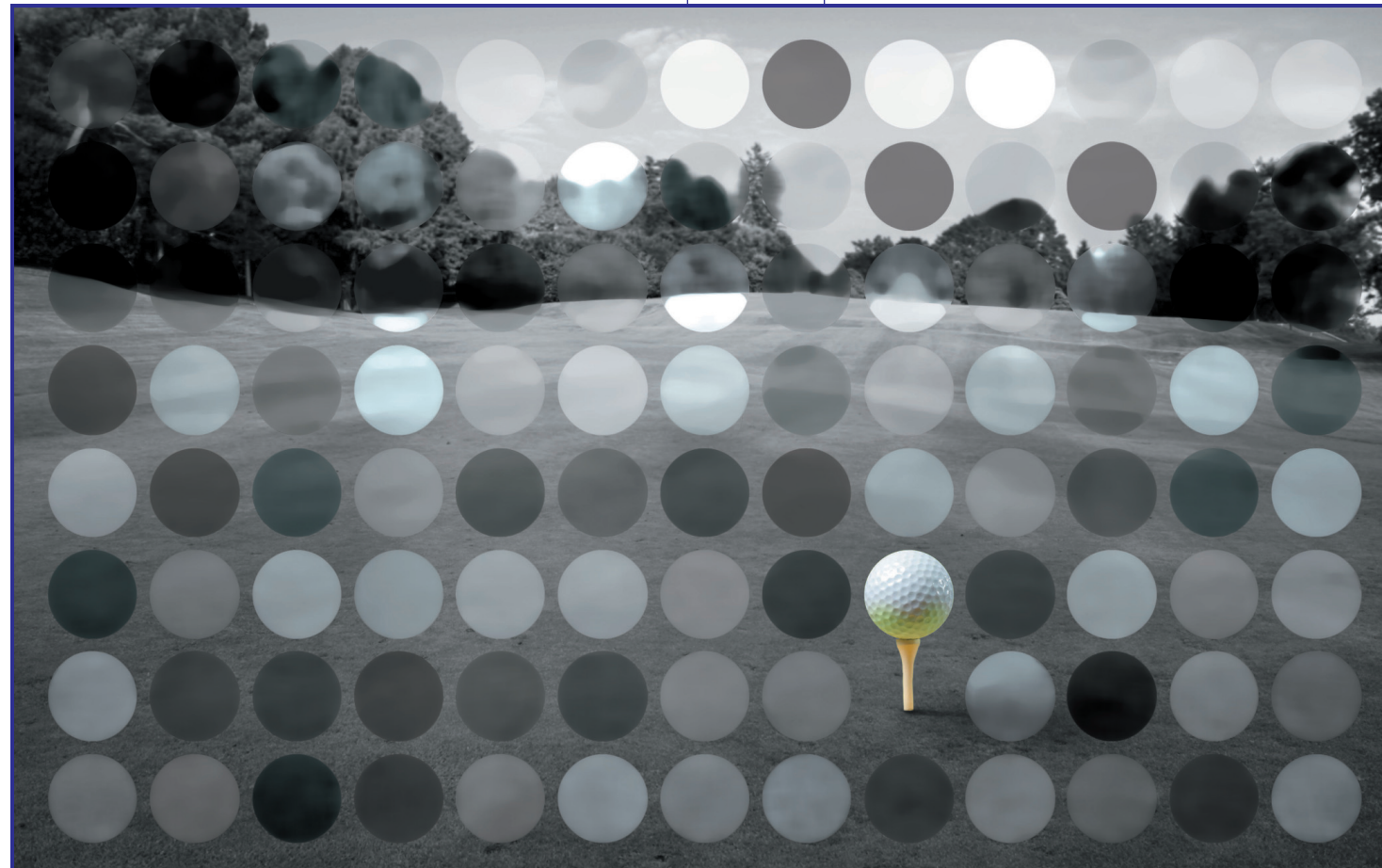
Freddy, completely out of it, could have been hit with a sledge hammer, and it wouldn't have bothered him. His eyes, fixed on his sweetie, didn't see danger comin' closer and closer. Slinky, that's what I call him for short, licked his lips when Wart yelled, "SNAKE! SNAKE!"

Freddy got the message and like a jet streakin' across the blue jumped into the pond. His legs pumped like a paddle wheel on an ol' Mississippi River boat and before I knew it, Wart was helpin' him up to safety. Whew! That was close. For a minute there, I thought Freddy was a goner.

Freddy soon composed himself, sat down on a toad stool and talked to Wart. "I've got to have her, Wart, but with that ugly snake facin' us, it don't seem likely."

"Now hold on thar, boy, suggested Wart. "Nothin's impossible, and where thar's love, love finds a way. You're gonna have to hide your feelin's for a while."

"THAT'S IT! HIDE!" shouted Wart. "Freddy, we'll camouflage you behind some leaves on an ol' tree limb. Slinky won't see you, and you can



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slowly paddle your way across the pond to the girl of your dreams. What do you think?"

"Might just work," nodded Freddy. "I'm willin' to try anythin'."

Soon they found a broken branch full of leaves, launched it, and Freddy started to paddle his way across the pond.

Now Benny and Bertha Bluejay just came back from food huntin' when they spotted Freddy movin' across the pond.

Slinky also saw Freddy comin' across the pond, and he knew what he was up to. Poor ol' Freddy was headin' straight for trouble, and his name was Slinky.

Benny and Bertha Bluejay, who know what love is, became frantically angry at Slinky. They quickly picked up some nuts from the ol' hickory tree and dive-bombed him. BOING! BOING! BOING! BULLS EYE! Poor Slinky. He never had his head conked like that before. Did it stop him? Uh! Uh! Seems like Slinky had a hard head.

So Benny and Bertha zoomed down toward Slinky and with a swish and a swash, they pecked at his head. Well, that was enough for Slinky, so he slid behind a rock to find safety. Wouldn't you know, Freddy didn't even know what had happened.

It wasn't a good day for Slinky, because it so happened that Teddy and his friend, Tommy, were out snake huntin'. Seems like they were fixin' to bring a squirmin' critter to school to show their science teacher; also probably to scare a lot of the girls.

They had a head hook at the end of a long broom stick that pulled tight with a little effort. Slinky popped his head to see if all was clear and ZAP! The boys got him. Slinky squirmed and fussed, but it was too late. In no time the boys put him in a sack and off to school he went.

You can't imagine how Freddy and Wart felt when they saw that sneaky ol' snake all caught in a burlap bag. Why, I'm telling ya, they laughed so hard, they cried. In fact, Wart even did cart wheels.

Now Freddy was free to do his courtin'. He picked a beautiful pink daisy from a nearby pink daisy patch and happily hopped toward his love. She was so delighted to see him, and when she told him her name was Frieda, Freddy rolled his big ol' frog eyes and swooned. GOLLY, AIN'T LOVE GRAND?

The courtship lasted for a short time, and soon they were married. Frieda was the prettiest bride of the year. Freddy, handsome as ever with a white daisy in his lapel, grinned with pride as his young bride walked down the aisle. Wart, Freddy's best friend, performed the weddin' ceremony. Benny and Bertha Bluejay, also a part of the weddin' party, were thrilled for the happy couple.

It was such a beautiful day. Everything was perfect. Love had come to Lilly Pond.

Freddy and Frieda went on their honeymoon alone in the marshes of ol' Mr. Bates' farm.

Many nights passed and we all heard their sweet song of love.

Soon winter rolled around, and all became still at the farm. The pond became stiff and each night the peaceful reflection of the moon on the sparkling ice made me wonder 'bout Freddy and Frieda, 'bout Slinky, Benny and Bertha. What would the next season bring?

Well, spring came sooner than I expected and with it, the fruits of love. Why, the pond was crawlin' with tadpoles, offspring of Freddy and Frieda. Even Benny and Bertha had new ones.

The farm became alive again, and I just had to fly around and take it all in.

One day, as I flittered to one of the upper branches of the ol' hickory, my keen eye caught sight of a flickerin' tail. Was that Slinky? How did he get away from those boys? What was he up to now, especially with a heap of young uns in that pond?

Well, friends that's another story. Till then, you all take care! Hear?



3RD PLACE — POETRY

## Dear New York Times Best Selling Author

by A.J. Coulter

*I appreciate a good jaw drop or dead protagonist as much as the next reader stuck at Dulles, but I still have sixty pages left for you to lure me down this corridor of the White House to story's end, and already I have waltzed with third-world leaders and double-agent prostitutes in Swiss ballrooms, witnessed the First Lady pay off mafia goons who are somehow linked to underground Nazi groups that once beld Hitler's secrets. And don't forget Jesus and his Coptic monks who save cryptic drawings, which when folded in rare Japanese origami shapes provide answers to life, happiness, and Amelia Earhart. The next chapter is titled "Shock and Awe", but I want the cuffs slapped on someone's wrists already, better yet banged, whacked, or zapped for the heinous crimes against our national security and that poor dog named Warren. Gruesome. Please, sir, let's turn the page on this one, close the files and cash that check already because I've flipped to 429 and know that America wins again, and the terrorists are stopped by that reporter whom you cast as yourself in the made-for-TV movie. Random House is half-right anyway, so let's be done, board the flight, and land this plane. I'm a fan.*

3RD PLACE — NON-FICTION

## Cole's Barn

by Martha Jeffers

One Indian summer afternoon, I pulled my rental car off a two-lane country road in southern Ohio to search for a familiar friend. Fifty years had passed since I'd visited my old neighborhood, and I wasn't sure what to expect.

The sun's rays streamed through the glass, and I squinted, shielding my eyes from the glare. Then, amid a scattering of golden-leaved elms, the tumbledown barn came into view. I could barely make out the peeling white letters on what was left of the roof: "Cole Farm, Est. 1896."

In bygone days the old barn stood proudly, its sideboards strong, its tin roof reflecting the sun. Once, suntanned boys and girls romped inside. I can almost hear their laughter as they leap from lofts into mounds of freshly-mown hay. Where is that laughter now? Chances are, the storms of life have taken their toll on those little ones, just like on that ramshackle barn. Crumpled walls have caved from neglect and the passage of time, but Cole's barn patiently waits.

Fat white chickens flapped and pecked at the cool earthen floor for scraps from their latest meal. We called their young ones "biddies," and they were tiny and soft and buttercup yellow.

I look closer and imagine a man in a shabby hat, a farmer, stooped by the weight of years. We all called him Grandpa Cole. Silently, we watched him from our hiding place in the tack room behind the russet saddles, the air heavy with the scent of leather and tobacco juice.

There was a peculiar quietness, the only sounds the buzz of a few deer flies and the scrape of Grandpa Cole's ragged work shoes as he shuffled past the horse stalls. Whiskbroom tails flickered. Ears quivered. Heads turned slightly to track his every move. Where is Grandpa now? Did he know we discovered his stash of moonshine under those loose boards in the wash house?

I remember Pat, a shorthaired black mongrel. That dog was Grandpa's constant companion — a long-legged shadow behind the plodding figure. The day Pat died, I saw Grandpa cry.

And Bob, the swaybacked coffee-colored workhorse. He lumbered up and down that dirt driveway with three of us perched on his sweaty back. What ever happened to Bob? Are he and Pat buried side by side in the stubbled stalks of the cornfield?

Grandpa Cole's barn. You look so rejected, collapsed against that hillside, where wind and rain bluster and swirl through your splintered doors and windows. Are you still waiting, watching for Grandpa and that lanky Pat? Do you yearn for even-tempered Bob to make another loop around the drive? For one more summer when children will frolic in the hay?

I eased my car back onto the highway, and felt a sense of contentment. I'd paid my respects to an unchanging memory. So long old barn, old friend. For me, you still exist, as tall and strong and proud as you were when I was young.