A Mother's Touch

By Doug Coppock – 2012

I. Poetry

On August 19, 2011 Mom had her 87th birthday. I sent her a card with a handwritten poem I had pulled from the internet. When we talked about it on her birthday, she said she loved the poem and had the card displayed prominently. I promised that on her next birthday the poem would be written by me instead of someone else!

Hey, I have no illusion that I am some great poet. If all the poems written in the history of mankind were stacked one on top of the other in order of greatness, mine would be crushed from the weight of those stacked above them. The few that I have written are basically to show the recipient (usually my wife) that I am investing some time to express my feelings.

My first attempt at *iambic pentameter* came when I decided to write a poem for Mom and Dad when their beloved cat "Shoes" passed. "Shoes" was a wild cat they were able to domesticate over a long period of time.

Shoes



Black cat, white paws, hungry, thirsty, and wild.
Possibilities seem good at Oaktree
For food, water, and adoption as child.
But satisfied, into the night I flee.

At ten sixty three they have named me Shoes.
Much more of this they will think I am tame.
If I stick around more? --nothing to lose.
Domestications all right! Glad I came.

Dick and Marie my love and respect earned.
So much that I sleep and purr in their laps.
Affection is mutual; wildness turned.
Yearnings abated, countless content naps.

Thanking you for heart fill'd by a rainbow,
Loving you, last time into night I go.

Nothing real flowery there. Shakespeare-like phrasing is not my forte, but I will admit the last line sort of successfully provides a heart stab.

I decided to embed the poem for Mom's 88th birthday within this short-story/essay/piece/whatever-you-want-to-call-it.

Hopefully this will provide context for the poem's reader.

II. Stevie



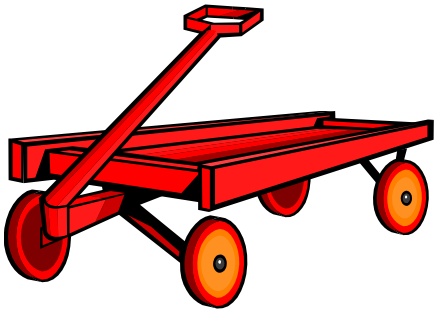
"Let's pour gasoline into this pan, throw in a match, and see what kind of explosion we get to celebrate July 4th!" I do not remember if there was a loud explosion. I do know that flames shot what felt like 15 feet into the air, and if I recall correctly Stevie's eyebrows were singed. That was typical Stevie, my best buddy from 1st through 5th grade, who lived one house north from us on Clearview in Canton; he was one year younger. He just had to push to the limit in everything he did, including getting into trouble. It came as no surprise to learn later in my youth that Stevie was killed in some kind of biking accident.

Stevie used to steal the car keys and back the car in and out of the garage. This was when he was 7 years old. Sure, most of the times we just sat in the car and pretended we were going some where. "I am going to back it out today", he declared one summer day. Unfortunately when he stepped on the gas the gearshift was NOT in reverse. The car lurched forward and slammed into the garage wall knocking it off its foundation. Whoops! I did not understand at the time, but later in life I realized that Stevie was a physically abused child. From a distance I saw him get beat about the head and shoulders with a cane for that particular episode.

One summer we stumbled upon an area with pile after pile of lumber. This was black lumber with a splintery contour that looked like it might be the remains from old torn down buildings. There were no signs stating private property keep out, or do not touch the lumber. So, of course, we had the brilliant idea to build forts.

These were fairly elaborate forts growing sometimes to three floors. The forts were built by laying four pieces of lumber on the ground as the foundation, and then gradually laying additional pieces on top of the others in such a way that the stack would grow in a stable fashion, similar to how a log cabin might be constructed. The Egyptians would have been proud. When the first level was high enough we laid smoother lumber in such a way to make a floor on which to stand, leaving an opening through which we could climb to reach that floor. This continued until we had three different levels that could be reached by climbing up from the ground floor. We built and visited these forts several times a week. One day we were caught by two guys with badges, stating that we were in trouble for disturbing park property. They actually talked us into a car to be taken to “headquarters”. Thankfully they were legitimate; have you seen the movie *Mystic River*? We were sentenced to eight consecutive Saturdays of picking up garbage in the park. We only showed up the first Saturday never to return. Fortunately there were no complaints.





Another summer Stevie got a new red wagon for his birthday. He insisted on giving me a ride in his garage (the same one he knocked off the foundation). He would push and I would steer. It was sort of like Charlie Brown kicking the football for Lucy. He insisted he would go slow and stop whenever I wanted. Of course he started going faster and faster in a big circle, laughingly refusing to stop. Naturally the wagon tipped over, I smashed my head against the cement wall, got a concussion, and developed amnesia. I could not remember anything. This happened right after we had lunch at his house. I still can recall the sense of urgency and panic in Mom’s

voice as she asked me questions I could not answer, like “What is your grandpa’s name?” or “What did you have for lunch?” Fortunately I awakened from my stupor that evening half way through my daily ritual of watching Howdy Doody and witnessed the overwhelming sense of relief that appeared on Mom’s countenance.

When I recall my childhood experiences with Stevie it seems like mostly all of them led to some kind of trouble or drama, with one exception. When Mom was around, Stevie seemed to be a perfect angel. Some would say this was a June Cleaver – Eddie Haskell relationship, but I think not. Stevie used to come over every morning to have a little something to eat before we proceeded to the bus stop. He was over for lunch almost every day during the summer. Mom was the den mother of our cub-scout pack. She took the whole pack out to sing Christmas carols in the dark of a snowy winter night. Never do I recall even the hint of a problem brewing with Stevie in those circumstances. Mom was not an iron-fisted disciplinarian. A few times she even had to use the “If you do not settle down I will have to call your dad at work” threat, but that was rare. Mom manifested a demeanor that made us kids want to be good. Simply put, she knew how to be a Mom. When Mom was around we basked in the sunshine of her presence, and that included other than her own children, kids like Stevie.



III. Vinton Manor

“I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know…” blared forth on the loud speaker from the voice of Bing Crosby as Mom stood in the middle of a mall in downtown Phoenix tears streaming down her face. I only heard this story

many years after it took place. It was late December 1957 and Mom had just recently flown with her four children from Cleveland, OH to Phoenix, with a long layover in Chicago to start a new life in the desert. Dad was already in Phoenix working at his new job with Motorola. The entire family stayed at the Vinton Manor in downtown Phoenix during the time it took to find and purchase the new home at the corner of 61st Street and East Calle del Norte.



Here was Mom missing her friends, home, and relatives from Ohio so much that the sound of *White Christmas* caused her to burst into tears. There certainly would be no white Christmas in the desert. The fact is that reflecting back on that time I realize I had no clue that the move to Arizona was having this impact on her. For us kids she made it seem like an adventure. She was responsible for seeing that the furniture was moved, for ensuring the kids had packed suitcases, for transportation to the airport, and for handling the children on the flights from Cleveland to Chicago and Chicago to Phoenix. Complete strangers approached her in the airport and let her know how impressed they were with the behavior of her four children.

Yes, Mom was and is a lot stronger than some people might give credit. When it came time to uproot her family, she was strong for her children, making the move for them an adventure rather than an upheaval.

IV. Calle del Norte

Whiffle Ball

When the family finally did settle in at 6101 E. Calle del Norte, our front yard became the attraction of the neighborhood for the boys my age. That was because that was where all the whiffle ball games took place. A few feet north of our driveway home plate was located. First base was the irrigation valve about 20 feet from home plate, second base was right on the berm of our property, and third base was another irrigation valve that happened to be right under an onion bush containing very sharp leaves. Of course the pitcher's mound was appropriately located between first and third. The outfield was the street (Calle del Norte) along with the downward slope from the berm of the Shull's front yard. Any fly ball carrying the Shull's berm was an automatic home run, but we could catch balls that carried into and fell out of any grapefruit tree for an automatic out, including the trees on the home run boundary. It was great fun.



We played two or three man teams. Or we played batter-up where three players took turns being one of pitcher, batter, or fielder. These games went on for several years, but we consistently kept track of the home run leaders. Bobby Tellier always won the home run race. I was always second. Robert Kelley, Dick Averitt, or David Coppock always fought it out for 3rd place. Many other kids played, but never enough to compete for the home run title.

All this play of course meant that the paths from home plate to the various bases were bare dirt. Home plate itself was just a big bare patch. I once heard a neighbor ask my Mom, “how can you let them play like that in your front yard and create all those bare spots?” To which my Mom replied with one of her most memorable quotes: “I am raising children, NOT grass!”



Clem

Not all my experiences at Calle del Norte are remembered fondly. Just after moving in there I was treated to my first pet, a dog that I named Clem after Red Skelton’s character Clem Kadiddlehopper. I loved that dog. But he got sick while still a puppy, doing a lot of coughing and being very lethargic. I came home one day from being out and about to find that Clem was not there. Mom explained that he was gone. I ran screaming and crying to my bedroom “I hate you, I hate you, I wanted to see him one more time and say good-bye.” Mom waited the appropriate amount of time for my sobbing to subside and for me to settle down, and then entered the bedroom to console me. She explained how they (Mom and Dad) felt it would be much harder on me to watch Clem being taken away compared to what I was going through now. It was a difficult concept to swallow. Looking back now after having had to say good-bye to *Barry Crane, Einstein, and Mulligan* I know she was right!



The Christmas Sweater

This is a very different story than Glenn Beck's novel by the same name. It does involve a sweater I got for Christmas when I was in 8th grade. It was a hand-me down from my Grandpa Coppock, a black cardigan with white trim and sort of a shiny velvety texture. I would have to say it was not exactly what kids would call an "in" piece of wardrobe. To appreciate the story surrounding this sweater the description of a few preceding experiences will help.

I used to walk home from Kaibab Elementary School every day for lunch, singing all the way. I also used to count the number of steps it used to take to complete the journey, interested in determining if the numbers changed depending on the direction or the size of the steps I took. Mom used to tell me she loved to hear me coming up the front walk each afternoon singing away. I am guessing these sorts of idiosyncrasies on my part made me a target for bullying peers. Most times I could handle myself pretty well when it came to being bullied. One time three guys tried to stuff me in a garbage can. I fought so violently they backed off.

But one episode got the best of me, probably because it indirectly involved a girl. We had mandatory dance lessons in the cafeteria in both 7th and 8th grades. I guess this was to help us learn to socialize correctly with the opposite sex. Even so, I never was any good at that until much later in life. One Friday night I attended the 8th grade dance. There was no concept of going with a date. Kids just showed up and boys asked girls to dance and vice versa. Sometimes there would be this kind of dance where one couple started the dance, and then the DJ would announce “go get another partner”. So that couple would split up and go ask someone else to dance. I think I now recall this was called a “snowball”.



Some of my “friends” got the bright idea to have the DJ announce that the next “snowball” would be kicked off by me and Marcia Crutchley. Those “friends” knew I would be nervous about doing so and thought it was a great practical joke. At the time of the announcement I was behind the curtain on the stage horsing around with a couple other friends. It is a fact that I did NOT hear the announcement. If I had heard the announcement I think I would have had the courage to follow through, but we will never know. When I appeared back on the dance floor I became the target of scorn and derision by quite a few of the guys. They were actually pushing me around and calling me a big chicken. Even after I explained I did not hear any announcement, that group continued mocking me, pushing me around, and calling me chicken. The snowball eventually did start, but not with me and Marcia. Me? I went home in tears.

And Mom was there to comfort me. She knew something was wrong even though I was able to fight back my tears before I got home. I cannot remember her exact words, but they were along the lines of “kids can be mean, you are special, do not be afraid to stand up for yourself, and do not worry about what other people think about you.” Whatever the words, I started feeling much better and actually developed a new attitude on how to handle situations like this.

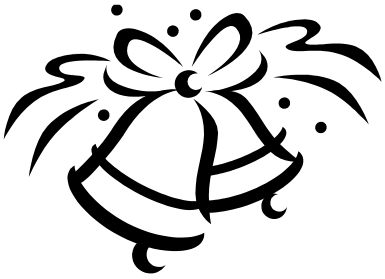
So, one day in early January I got the courage to finally wear my Christmas sweater to school. I remember standing on the basketball court having just completed shooting some baskets by myself during our 15 minute recess. I can remember seeing Eric Widmark and Rick Rhodes at an adjacent basket and hearing Rick say to Eric “let’s go make fun of Coppock’s sweater.” I might not have been as prepared as I was had I not overheard the comment, but I was ready. “Nice sweater Coppock, where did you get it?” dripping with sarcasm. “Why thank you very much. It is a little different. It’s from my grandfather who passed away a few years ago. I decided to wear it in his memory”. Believe me I could tell they were both totally caught off guard by my response. In the end they admired the sweater from a different perspective and genuinely so. I had learned a new life lesson. The strength to handle this confrontation, I truly believe came from my after-the-dance conversation with Mom. Thanks Mom!

V. Through the Years



Baseball

Dad used to love to tell the story about the first question Mom asked when she volunteered to be official scorer for the Padres, the first Little League baseball team I ever played for. The question was: “What’s an inning?” The fact is that Mom did learn to keep score of baseball games and she came to every game. This is just another example of the dedication she had to caring for and raising her children.



The Wedding

Mom attended two thirds of my weddings. It was the final appearance that was most memorable, because she initially said she could not make it. The day before the wedding I got called from my classroom by the assistant principal to meet a woman at the door. I remember looking down at her thinking “Is there some kind of problem with this mom’s child in my classroom; who is she?” I was waiting to be introduced, when she said “Douglas, don’t you recognize me?” It actually took a couple seconds for it to register who this woman was.

Then we played the same trick on Lonnie that night. Our apartment was full of people helping us get ready, Lonnie in command, when the bell rang. I knew who it was, but no one else did. Lonnie recognized Mom right away and screamed mightily! But she did not have to perform the cognition under unusual circumstances like I did.

It was just the bride, groom, and two Moms at the wedding ceremony. The reception was attended by quite a few people. One of the highlights for me was the groom/mother dance, probably the one and only time I ever danced with Mom. She let me know that she was so happy I had finally found the love of my life. Indeed!



Christmas Time

Some of my fondest memories from childhood and later are of Mom baking cookies, us listening to Christmas carols over and over (singing along), the kids helping to decorate the tree by throwing tinsel at it, and placing the ornaments just so. This was Mom's special time of year the time when she shown the brightest.

When I was away at college and flew home for the holidays, I can still remember how my spine used to tingle as the plane was landing. I would soon be home to see Mom and family and to celebrate Christmas.

Mom never disappointed. There were always plenty of "white mice" and cut-out cookies in the shape of angels, reindeer, and

Santa. On the Christmas mornings at Calle del Norte, the Coppock kids would be up and about at 4:00 AM, working up the courage to wake the parents.



Over the years Mom and I developed a little routine the origin of which I cannot recall. Whoever calls the other first as Christmas day approaches starts with “Bah, humbug” when the other answers. Of course, we never mean it.

VI. Birthday Celebration



What follows is a poem written by Doug Coppock, dedicated to his beloved mother Marie on her 88th birthday.

A Mother's Touch

Not all are lucky to have a mother
Who cherishes her children more than life,
Who forsakes herself for all the other
Little ones needing help through daily strife.

Enter this world with no understanding
Of bullies and pain, love and hate, and such.
Fathers and counselors not withstanding
Most issues best handled by mother's touch.

Loving caress, with a gentle hand blessed,
Words of wisdom during painful sessions,
A mother's comfort is surely the best
For allaying fears; teaching life lessons.

She made childhood fun, guiding us daily,
My own angel gave of herself gladly.

