

Second Place '17 Memoirs Contest Winner – The Writers' Workshop of Asheville –

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BLOODLETTING

A Memoir by Jude Walsh

Bloodletting *noun, historical*

- the surgical removal of some of a patient's blood for therapeutic purposes.
- the violent killing and wounding of people during a war or conflict.
- bitter division and quarreling within an organization.

Summer 1958

White light blossomed before my eyes, a sharp pain exploded on the right side of my head, and I felt my knees buckle. My next awareness was my sister standing over me, rubbing a sore spot on my head and urgently, almost demandingly, repeating, “You’re all right.”

I sat up, not feeling a bit of all right and wondering what had happened. The next voice, a boy’s, sounded annoyed as well. “I yelled “Heads up” weren’t you paying attention?” No. I didn’t hear that. And even if I had, what did that mean?

I was eight years old and was at the neighborhood park where my sixteen-year-old sister was the playground attendant. This park was at the end of our street and quite modest. There was a small shelter, a space with a building mid-center housing a restroom and small storage shed and several picnic tables under the roofed wing. The grounds included the usual 50’s equipment: a slide, a set of baby swings and a set of real swings,

teeter-totters, monkey bars, a go-round, and a small swimming pool. Well, we called it a swimming pool but its deepest point was about two or three feet so perhaps wading pool was more accurate.

I touched my hand to the sore spot on the side of my head. I could feel a bump rising and when I looked at my fingers there were bright red splotches on the tips. *I'm bleeding.* My sister sprang into action, pressing a cool compress against my head and repeating, "You're all right." I didn't know if I was okay or not but I knew I did not want my sister to be upset. In my mind it was because I had done something wrong and I thought it must have something to do with "Heads up." I should have known what it meant or that boy would not be upset, my sister would not be worried, and my head wouldn't hurt. I wiped the blood from my fingertips, struggled to sit up, and claimed to be okay. I took the position that if something went wrong, it must be my fault, and I need to do better. I assumed blame for my being hurt. It didn't matter that I was bleeding and dizzy and my head was pounding. At age eight I had already learned to accommodate the feelings of others first, to disconnect from my body and ignore my own physical needs, to assume responsibility for whatever happened, and to put myself last. It would become my default position in life.

Fall 1962

I'm bleeding. There are spots of blood on my underwear. I know what this is, my period. We had a session at school where the boys and girls were sent to separate classrooms. The woman gym teacher showed us a film, "What's Happening to Your Body." I was fascinated yet uneasy. I was going to bleed once a month? And I would

have to wear an elastic belt around my waist and this bulky pad between my legs? The logistics of this confounded me. How much would I bleed? How would I change this pad and where would I dispose of it? Would there be a smell? They talked about the possibility of cramps and I was definitely feeling uncomfortable. At “the talk” they gave each girl a package containing a belt and three pads and a small booklet reiterating the basics. They also gave each of us a brown lunch bag to carry the supplies back to homeroom in case the package did not fit into a purse. I guess this was to avoid embarrassment but a bunch of girls returning to homeroom with brown lunch bags was pretty attention grabbing. It is curious that I never wondered what the boys were doing while we were getting this body fact download. I was way too busy trying to process what was going to happen to me. I had a mother and an older sister but could not recall ever seeing any of this stuff at home. It must be hidden and therefore secret or something to be shamed of. And now I am bleeding. My sister no longer lives at home; she is away at nursing school so I must turn to my mother. By the time she got home from work I had already wrestled myself into the belt and pad. The bulkiness felt so awkward, so – huge. I wanted to NOT deal with this.

I wasn't filled with joy because I was now a woman. I knew what that meant. I knew a woman could get pregnant and I knew that getting pregnant was bad. You would disgrace your family and ruin your future and no one would ever want you as a wife. Unless of course you were forced to get married no matter how old you were or any other circumstance like you didn't want to be married. If you got pregnant it was the girl's fault for not having more self-control. It was crystal clear to me that boys had no

self-control so it was all up to me. And now my body was signaling that I was a woman, I had entered the danger zone.

My mother had never mentioned anything about menstruation to me. I guess she was uncomfortable talking about it and assumed, rightly, the school would. So when she walked up the stairs that afternoon, I just blurted out, "I got my period." She stopped dead in her tracks and eyes downward, asked if I had enough supplies. I had hidden the package from school in my dresser drawer so perhaps she had seen them when she put away my clothes. "I had three pads from school and I have used one." My mom, tired from her job at a sewing mill, none-the-less went right back out of the house and returned with a full box of menstrual pads. She never asked me how I felt or if I had any questions but I knew she was doing the best she could while being well out of her comfort zone. Even though this was a life changing moment for me, I was more concerned about her and her feelings. I did not have any resentment that as the child I wasn't put first. I was already conditioned out of that.

Summer 1967

I really loved my new boyfriend, was sure he was "the one." We were together almost constantly. His family owned a home on a lake so we were swimming often. The day came when I was having my period. In 1967 I was not using a tampon because, well, then I would no longer be a virgin and being a virgin was important. I didn't want to swim that day. I was repulsed by the idea of wearing a pad into the lake. I was afraid it would become saturated and then water would drain from my private area when I left the water. Or, what if my blood just avoided the saturated pad and flowed out into the lake

and was visible. What if the blood attracted fish or snakes? Horrible, embarrassing thoughts. I never developed the kind of friendships where I could talk to other girls about this. I certainly couldn't talk to my boyfriend so I had just hoped my period did not fall on swim days and until this day it hadn't.

I finally had to confess to my boyfriend, not that I was having my period, blood was not discussable, but that I was having cramps. I had the worst cramps with my period, often having to miss a day of school each month. It would be years before I would learn that exercise, as opposed to curling up in a ball, would relieve the cramping. My boyfriend's reaction was curious to me, "That just means you are a healthy woman." What? I did not know how to process that. Healthy as in I can get pregnant? Healthy as in my body functions like other women? What is healthy about being doubled over with cramps? And what does he know about it? I never asked a single one of those questions. I was just relieved to not have any additional discussion. I could see why some girls referred to this as "the curse."

Married Life

For the first five years of our marriage we slept in the nude. Except when I was bleeding. On those five or six days I wore panties, even though I was sometimes using tampons as opposed to pads. I always felt vaguely ashamed of my body during menstruation. Our sex life was nothing to brag about, we were not having intercourse that often so those five or six days simply meant I did not have to be ready for sex if he chose to initiate. I did occasionally initiate sex but he usually rejected me, leaving me feeling

undesirable and lonely. So despite the cramps and the inconvenience and the worries about accidents, the five days of bleeding offered a bit of respite, a mixed blessing.

June 1976

I am pregnant. For the first time in our marriage we had unprotected sex and I just know I am pregnant. My father-in-law once told me he could tell if a woman was carrying a baby by her eyes. He claimed a pregnant woman's eyes are different; he could not describe exactly how, but he said he always knew it when he saw it. We were meeting up with my in-laws for their youngest son's college graduation a few days after so I thought I would see if he noticed anything. He did. He immediately took me aside and asked if I knew I was pregnant. I had hoped and now I was sure. This was less than a week after conception.

We had planned to have children but wanted to wait until my husband finished law school. This was a year early but I knew we would manage it somehow. From the moment I felt pregnant I knew I was carrying a boy. I was gifted with this kind of Irish intuition and that is probably why I trusted the intuition, the knowing, my Irish father-in-law was professing. The only draw back was I was a bit embarrassed about being pregnant because then everybody KNEW we had sex. I was married for five years by this time and was clearly not going to embarrass the family or ruin my chances for a good husband but I was still embarrassed. I remembered a very pregnant woman once saying to me, "Yeah, now everybody knows what we've been doing." She meant it as a joke, but I had that unease.

The big upside to being pregnant was no monthly bleeding. I finally felt like my body was doing what it was designed to do, building a new human being, so instead of

sloughing off blood, all was going into the creation of a new life. I had little information about giving birth, even after the childbirth classes, and was concerned about the month of bleeding they said would happen post delivery but for now, all was well. If any blood had shown, that would have been a bad thing, indicating a problem with the pregnancy. That did not happen.

Winter 1984

I desperately want another child. Each month when I bleed it serves notice that my biological clock is ticking and I am not yet making another baby. There is a problem here. My sex life is close to nonexistent. My husband refuses to discuss this. When I try different things to entice him, he rejects me. The coldest rejection being his saying, "I am just not attracted to you." That shut me up and put me off for a long time. I finally screw up my courage and say, "I would like to have another child." His response? "Okay, we will." and my reply was, "You do know we have to have sex for that to happen?" No response and the bleeding continues.

May 1998

I have been bleeding for more than a month. Not just bleeding, more like hemorrhaging. I am inserting two tampons and using a pad and I still need to change every few hours. I am beginning to feel unwell. I finally check in with my gynecologist and she draws blood that confirms I am anemic. Her solution is quite simple, if I agree to take birth control pills, my period will regulate. At age 47 I am giving up on the idea of

children so why not? Now I bleed with extreme consistency and efficiency, five days a month, no cramping.

April 2003

I do not know where to turn. I have discovered that my husband is having an affair with a twenty-three year old woman, two years younger than our son. And after being caught, he is unsure that he wants to stop the affair and work on whatever made him think that this was okay or to try and repair the marriage. I am meeting with my priest, as it is the beginning of Lent. As a practicing Catholic, it is my custom to choose something to give up during the 40 days of Lent. I find myself telling him the whole sordid story. I share the infidelity that is occurring and how devastated I am by my husband's unwillingness to decide. I describe it thusly, "It is as if I am slowly bleeding to death and he is asking me to donate blood." I am deeply touched by the compassion of this priest. He takes both my hands into his, looks deeply into my eyes and says, "I'm sorry you are experiencing this. Thank you for having the courage to tell me. In this Lenten season, you have but one job, stop the bleeding." I knew exactly what he was saying. He was encouraging me to step away from my deeply ingrained Catholic belief that marriage is forever, to start to take care of myself and to leave my husband to God. He was asking the little girl on the playground to stop caretaking everyone else.

September 2003

My husband is heading to the west coast for a conference and has asked her to join him. I am horrified. I protest and he claims that after talking, *they* decided to not get together then. They? WE are they, not him and his mistress. Yes, he is supporting her

financially. It is clear to me what is happening here but he is blind to it. And I am so damaged by this trauma, this shock, that I am barely functional. After dropping him off at the airport, I stop at the grocery store. When I reach up to slam down the hatch back of the SUV I am not careful; I am off balance. The edge of the door hits the side of my head and I am knocked to the ground, rendered senseless for a few seconds. *I'm bleeding.* Blood is seeping down the side of my face and I just lose it. I cry and cry and cry; salty tears merging with the blood flow. I am helped up by a passerby and, like on the playground so many years ago, I decline assistance. I climb into the car, grab a bag of frozen French Fries from my groceries and press them against my head. Months later I will retrieve that package from the freezer, the husband now ensconced in his own apartment, and see the frozen drops of blood still there and wonder what I am doing and where my life is going.

June 2009

My partial mastectomy is scheduled for five days after my final divorce hearing. I cannot imagine feeling any lonelier or more frightened. My social worker at the Cleveland Clinic interviews me as part of my patient intake. One of the questions she asked was, "Have you been abused?" Of course I answered no. He had never hit me, never drawn blood. I had a quick flash back to a day when while we were arguing about his mistress and I turned to him and said, "Why don't you just hit me."

He was deeply offended. "I would never hit you."

"You've abused me in every other way possible. Just hit me and then people will see and understand."

The social worker persisted; asking me to describe what was going on in my life. I shared the affair, the mistress, the PTSD, the long drawn out divorce. She looked me dead in the eye and said, "You must start telling yourself and everyone else the truth. You have been abused and abused badly. I see this all the time in women with breast cancer. Tell yourself the truth. You were abused and now you have gotten yourself out of that marriage and need to focus on making yourself well and healing." I took her at her word. Despite how uncomfortable it still makes our friends, I no longer sugarcoat why and how this long marriage ended. I no longer discount the blood shed in the process.

Menopause

I stopped taking birth control pills. I no longer have a need for them. My body has embraced menopause, the cessation of the menses, the ending of monthly bleeding. I am divorced. The bloodletting has ceased and I am at one with my body. It is more than that; I embrace my body. For the first time in my life I am athletically active. I distance walk, bicycle; take Zumba classes, hike, and kayak. The only bleeding I do these days is from cuts and scrapes when I occasionally fall off my bike or stumble on a hike. I embrace and celebrate every drop.