

TRAVELS WITH OUR AUNT
Introduction: Times Have Changed
by Barbara Passero

The following story, *Travels with our Aunt*, is set in a totally different era in American history from today. It's scary, but life today is actually even more frantic, fantastic, fast-paced, disconnected, and lonely than when I wrote the first draft of this story seven years ago. When I was a teenager, my friends and I were eager to separate from our parents. Who could imagine that today American youth would constantly twitter and tweet *their parents*?¹ In those days of neighborly neighbors, who could imagine that people would spend hours each day uploading their lives to Facebook, LinkedIn, and other social networking sites? Back then, in the days of white picket fences, who could imagine that folks would film themselves performing interesting sexual acts for the world to see on YouTube? Hey, who could imagine YouTube? We've gone from too many details in real life to "Second Life," and other virtual worlds. Adults have "second lives" where they can reinvent themselves. Even Rod Serling, producer of the fantastic 1960s-era science fiction series, *Twilight Zone*, seemed to have missed this development, or maybe he thought it was too far-fetched even for his program.

When I was born just after the end of WWII, the country was recovering from the strains and stresses of a war-time economy. My parents had four children by 1952, and they didn't have money for extras—and almost everything except food, utilities, school supplies, and house payments was extra. All our family trips ended at a relative's home. My family spent the holidays with other family members. Friends

¹ In November 2009, a young woman, reported to be wearing head phones, took a short cut back to school after lunch and walked in front of an oncoming commuter train. She was a senior at the Belmont, Mass., High School who would have graduated the next June. Almost exactly the same thing happened in Shirley, Mass., when two high school friends decided to cut across the railroad tracks in the town. One was wearing head phones and stepped right in front of the oncoming train. The other girl heard the train coming, but she couldn't save her friend. The deceased girl's mother blamed the trains for being too quiet.

entertained each other with card games, Halloween parties, buffet dinners, and cook outs; everyone reciprocated with invitations. If you didn't reciprocate, your friends took turns surmising what was *really* going on.

We lived in a great neighborhood where people talked to each other—*in person*. Telephone calls were expensive, so people didn't use the phone much. Without gas-powered leaf blowers, lawn mowers, or hedge clippers, weekends were quieter and peaceful, but busier. We all worked around the house. My father got his hair cut on Saturday. We washed our only vehicle on Sunday. Then we mowed our lawn with a hand mower and watered it with a hose. During the summer, we picked blackberries in the nearby meadows, jumped in the sprinkler, or splashed around in our kiddie pool. Life was less complicated with fewer choices of anything; and most products were manufactured in this country.

As I said, a young child's world in the suburbs was smaller, simpler, and safer then. I owned only one or two dolls, but my parents read to us and played LPs and sang songs from the 1940s and 1950s. I can still remember some of them more than 50 years later. We walked one mile to school no matter the weather and played outdoors with the neighborhood children in the winter after school and all day in the summer. In the summer, our mothers didn't worry about us; all the mothers watched out for the neighborhood kids. If we were playing at a kid's home, the mom brought us sandwiches, potato chips, and Kool-Aid or lemonade, and left us to our own devices. Often they had to treat mild cases of poison ivy. Occasionally they had to deal with emergencies such as cuts, cracked heads, or broken arms.

Fences weren't necessary so we had free access to our friends' yards. There was a narrow gravel street between my home and the one next door in which an elderly couple lived. We played all kinds of games in the street since there was practically no traffic during the day. No matter how hard we tried not to hit our balls into their yard, some ended up there. We couldn't get the ball back until a parent would ransom them with promises of good behavior. Ha! It wasn't our fault; the balls just got there somehow.

In our backyard, we had a heavy steel swing set. One day this swing set fell over with the weight of the eight or nine children who were swinging and climbing on it.

After that fiasco, my dad sank the legs deep into blocks of wet cement, and we had no more flying children. Nearby the swing set, our sugar maple tree, with thick bottom limbs only about three feet off the ground, was great for climbing. We all climbed, with my elder brother Ed reaching the top; my sister Jan up next to him; and my younger brother Jay just below them. I was the most timid, so I never got farther up the tree than six or eight feet. The others used to fall out of the tree with few injuries, but once Ed fell and broke his arm, which caused quite a fuss. Now on visits to my old neighborhood, that tree looks very small, not the fearsome brother killer of the old days.

On three sides of our neighborhood of several short streets, we had fields and woods where we walked in puddles, dug up worms, discovered small animals, picked wild strawberries and blackberries, and swung from huge vines. We got poison ivy, stung by bees, sunburned, tore our clothes, but had a lot of fresh air, exercise, and, most of all, FREEDOM. All our mothers spent a lot of time and energy “tsk tsking” over their children’s clothes. A few years later, TV commercials would challenge them about how white they got their husband’s undershirts.

My mother’s father had a huge radio; my family had a smaller one, but there were few other electronics in our home until my parents bought a TV in the late 1950s. My parents read the newspaper, talked with the neighbors *in person*, and visited relatives often. We lived without cell phones, VHS, DVDs, digital radios, phones, clocks, phones, digital records, ipads, t-phones, and computers. No Internet news of cyclones on the other side of the world. My parents read a lot so they knew what was going on. But we kids heard very little about the world—only that starving children would have welcomed our dinner of liver and onions. In school, we crawled under our desks during regular Cold War drills. Ha! Like the desks would have saved us from the effects and after-effects of a nuclear bomb. The bliss of ignorance.

Like I said, a totally different world, yet very much the same as today. Some people still believe implicitly what they’re told; and others are still hiding under their desks.

1,093 words

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By Barbara Passero

We Cleveland cousins were lucky to have a huge extended family. The home of our Grandmother Dora and Grandpa Sam Finkelstein, my mother's parents, was the hub of family activities. They lived at 1258 Rozelle Street in East Cleveland, Ohio, and we went there for Sunday dinners just about every week. We spent most holidays at their home, too. Grandma's large oval table was often set for fifteen guests. For Thanksgiving, my siblings and I, and four to six young cousins ate at a separate table in the living room. On the Sabbath and Yom Kippur, we all walked to services at the synagogue that was one mile away, because Grandpa and Grandma were Orthodox Jews.

Our Aunt Myrtle Finkelstein Olchin, my mother's second-eldest sister, and her husband Arthur Olchin didn't have children of their own. Aunt Myrtle was our personal angel—she was there for each of us. Aunt Myrtle was one of those special people who look for ways to make everyone's life a little better.

Our aunt was wonderful—kind and generous—especially to all her young nieces and nephews. She took us, either in pairs or several at a time, “downtown”—into Cleveland for shopping excursions, lunches, or movies. We took buses into the city, which was 14 miles from our home in Mayfield Heights—a long ride all the way for wiggly, restless children. After arriving downtown near the terminal tower, we took the escalator downstairs to May Company. During the entire trip into the city, we argued about who would be the first to order a deliciously thick vanilla or chocolate Frosty Malted. A Frosty Malted was so thick, it left a mustache that we licked off to savor the last drop. Aunt Myrtle loved them herself.

Our favorite luncheon place was the Pickwick Cafeteria on Elm Street. An old-time cafeteria, the Pickwick had a long L-shaped stainless steel counter filled with an impressive assortment of hot foods, with the ubiquitous jello, tapioca pudding, and

bread pudding, all with a dollop of whipped cream on top, at the end of the line. African-American serving people in starched aprons and white gloves stood behind the steaming dishes eager to load your plate with wonderful food.

The Pickwick had the most delicious mashed potatoes. In an act we thought majestic, a serving person wearing white gloves carefully created a deep depression in the big serving of just-right creamy potatoes with a silver ladle and then filled the space with the best hot gravy in the world. The steam rose enticingly from the potatoes and gravy. Out of respect for our aunt, we held in our urge to gobble them up as soon as the plate reached our tray. Ah, nothing since has ever tasted or smelled as good.

We loved going to the Pickwick with our aunt because she treated us like adults and let us order anything we wanted. My cousin Armond had a legendary appetite; he was famous for eating only massive quantities of several varieties of potatoes (mashed, French-fried, baked, etc.) at the Pickwick. (Yes, I saw it myself.) Also renowned for his appetite was my elder brother, Ed. To prevent his fainting from hunger, our aunt would buy him lunch, popcorn at the movies, and an early supper during their afternoons together.

We all had the feeling of luxury and indulgence when with Aunt Myrtle, which we didn't get at home because money was tight. On one occasion, Cousin Cyndy, our family historian, remembers going to the movies with Ed and Aunt Myrtle. Ed didn't like the movie, so Aunt Myrtle took them to another they liked better. This may seem ordinary today, but at that time children weren't indulged; it was a big thing to us.

Trains also remind me of Aunt Myrtle and Cleveland. The trestle bridge for trains going to and from the busy East Cleveland Station was 50 yards from our grandparents' home. Staying overnight with them in the 1950s meant being blasted out of bed several times by piercing whistles and clattering wheels as long, long trains crossed over the bridge.

During our afternoons together, Aunt Myrtle sometimes took us to the elegant East Cleveland station to see the huge steam and diesel locomotives huffing and blowing while discharging passengers from faraway cities such as Boston, New York,

or Hartford, and waiting to pick up passengers bound for Chicago and points in the romantic far west. One time, as a young child, I was terrified when one huge, smoking monster thundered past the platform. I hid my face in Aunt Myrtle's heavy, soft coat, and she sheltered me, making me feel safe, but not foolish for being afraid.

A child of the Depression in a family of 11 people, Aunt Myrtle gave us opportunities that she must have missed herself. She sent my sister Jan and me to puppet-making classes at the Cleveland Museum of Art when we were in our early teens. The classes were wonderful, and it was no less wonderful that we were trusted to take the 14-mile bus trip into the city by ourselves. When I was 13, and in that gawky, awkward stage, Aunt Myrtle sent me to modeling classes in the city. I learned correct posture, to walk gracefully (I hope), and to apply make-up. The classes and the personal attention did a lot to build my self-esteem.

Aunt Myrtle was a peacemaker and taught me a great deal about human relations (most of which didn't sink in until much later). When I complained about my parents or some kid thing that my sister did, she would say kindly, "Let bygones be bygones." (I guess that's something like saying, "let it go.") I remember answering, "Ohhhhhhhh, Aunt Myrrrr-tle," when she would suggest that seemingly impossible thing.

When I was 14, Aunt Myrtle and Uncle Arthur moved to a tiny house on Orchard Heights Street in the town of Mayfield Heights, where we lived. I was ecstatic. We walked a mile to school, and her street was on the way home. Although I was soon to go to high school and didn't get the full benefit of her presence, my younger brother, Jay, remembers stopping at her house often on his way home. Aunt Myrtle answered the door with a smile, offering cookies and Ovaltine. Ovaltine was an important part of our ritual with her since she often served it to us and our friends when we visited.

Her neat house had a very pretty little yard, and Aunt Myrtle was especially proud of the plum tree that each spring was full of beautiful purple blossoms. I remember the delicious plum jam she made each year. I also remember the pot roast dinners (complete with turnips) she prepared for us. She always served us on her good china, never complaining when we spilled something on her linen tablecloth.

During high school, I visited my aunt with my girlfriends, and she made them comfortable in her homey living room, offering pop or Ovaline and snacks.

After I went away to college, Aunt Myrtle continued to show her interest in me by phone calls (*very* early Saturday morning) and by sending me checks for \$5.00 (that was a lot in 1964 -1968). When it looked like I might not be able to finish college because of my parent's financial difficulties, Aunt Myrtle made me a permanent loan so that I could register for my last term. She was very proud of me at the graduation ceremony.

In the fall of 1968, after agonizing with her over the decision, I moved to Boston. I had terrible fits of loneliness that she helped to quell with her cheerful phone calls. I only saw her two or three times before she died of leukemia at 63 in June 1970. In April 1970, the last time I saw her, she was still cheerful and thinking about others even though she was very ill and in great pain. In those days, the medical community thought patients dying from cancer might become addicted and prescribed pain medicine on a strict schedule. My wonderful aunt died on June 20, 1970, leaving a big hole in my life and in my heart.

When I was a sophomore in high school, Aunt Myrtle must have seen that I was unsettled and depressed, although I thought it was a normal state of mind, and my parents never mentioned any difference. Depression wasn't discussed in my parents' day; the world considered depressed people as weak or crazy.

But my wonderful aunt said gently, "If you ever feel that you need help, don't be afraid to get counseling." I couldn't answer, and I didn't understand what she meant until nine years later when I sank into a deep depression and relentless anxiety after she died. I sought counseling ("take up hobbies, fill up your time"), which helped for a while. Later, I heard from Cousin Cyndy that Aunt Myrtle had had a "nervous breakdown" and tried to commit suicide after her parents (my grandparents) died. She had passed on the advice about counseling to save me from some of the disaster she had experienced.

Then in August, just a few months after my aunt died, I "solved all my problems" by marrying an alcoholic who distrusted most people, but who *loved* me. A few years into the marriage, I sought counseling for real. After working with a

wonderful counselor, I saw that, like my aunt and my mother, I unconsciously set myself up for failure by marrying a man who couldn't take care of himself, let alone support me emotionally. He wanted me to love him unconditionally and forget and forgive his unforgivable behavior. It took me a long time, but I finally left that sad man and started a new life, which has fulfilled its promise and is much healthier for me.

Aunt Myrtle taught me about love, kindness, and the importance of taking care of oneself while encouraging the dreams and hopes of others. She believed in me—so I learned to believe in myself. I think of her often, and I try to be positive and grateful for everything in my life—acknowledging that rainbows and puddles follow rain and that rain nourishes the plum trees in our lives.

Today, I'm a town meeting member in the busy town of Belmont, Mass. I volunteer with several organizations. As a tribute to my aunt's stalwart mentorship, I've developing the Young Women's Career and Mentor Kit (CAMKit) Programs (<http://www.wickedlocal.com/belmont/news/education/x1631827058/Exhibit-on-display-at-Chenery>)

to help young women explore a host of STEM-related, traditional, and nontraditional careers. We use hands on, engaging activities in after-school workshops, career days, and vacation camps to help young women discover their skills and interests and map them with career paths. I'm "paying it forward" by passing these messages on to my nephews, great nephews, and great niece, to the students in CAMKit programs, and to all others I meet in my life.

1,790 words