

Over the past seven years, the Citizen's WriteNow! contest has asked for children's stories, murder mysteries, light poetry, and short stories. This year, for the first time, we wanted non-fiction, asking people to write memoirs of the moments or people that changed their lives.

We had about 300 entries. Anne Shmelzer, a New Edinburgh piano teacher, won the first prize of \$300. Columnist Charles Gordon said the story "dealt with an emotional topic, the return from the war, with great subtlety and a nice eye for detail. The story built a powerful sense of anticipation and an ending that was satisfying, yet avoided pathos."

Second prize went to Ruth Latta of Dynes Road, for her piece, "I Had a Pond." Ms. Latta also won an honourable mention in this year's Nepean Public Library Short Story Contest for her work, "Kindred Spirits."

Third prize went to Paul Mackan, an Ottawa writer for his memoir, "My Sheridan Side."

## FIRST PRIZE WINNER

BY ANNE SHMELZER

I would guess that my brother and I had been told well in advance of Dad's return home from the war. I can't truly say because I only remember the actual moment when he appeared before me. I have always wondered why I cannot recall the preparations for his arrival, a dinner being prepared or happy, excited exclamations, tears of joy. Surely a letter from him advising us of his discharge must have been read around the dining table but I cannot remember. I was probably involved with my two baby dolls, Precious and Cuddles, washing them, combing their hair and changing their diapers.

As decades pass, the elusiveness of sequential memory, particularly in recollecting and organizing circumstances that must have shaped and influenced my character and behavior, continues to mystify me. I seem capable of retaining only the significant happening itself, the events leading up to it compressed within a short duration, perhaps only a minute. A bent arm, the prickle of wool, the chirp of a robin at nightfall, the scent of face powder, a sip of lemonade — these sensory images are the relics of memory, snapshots of abbreviated time.

My brother and I, aged eight and four respectively, are in the great front bedroom of our grandparents home, the parents of my father. The place is 307 Gowan Avenue, in a working class suburban neighbourhood of Toronto. The time is an August evening in 1945.

I shall never forget the house, or my English grandfather's abundant garden where stone-edged pathways led to the rear arbour of peach and pear trees.

The old kitchen had an ice box, the kind in which a block of ice was placed. The iceman came every few



PAUL GILLIGAN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

# The night my father came back from the war

days and brought the ice into the house with big iron tongs. He carried it from the street through the narrow alley separating Grandpa's house from the neighbours. He lugged it up the back steps, through the cluttered dilapidated back porch into the kitchen, sawdust running on the floor. He would sing to me, "B-B-B, Baby-Face, You've got the cutest little b-b-b-baby face," and wiggle his ears.

I loved the house, the over-stuffed horsehair sofa and chair in the parlour, the phone at the dining room window where my grandmother would sit and fight with her sisters. I marvelled at the way she spoke to them so sharply and I regretted never being able to hear their side of the argument.

Frustrated from the one-sided conversation, not knowing the reason for their spats, I would wander up to the next storey, to the bathroom with the deep, long bathtub, the black and white tiles. I would long for evening to come, when Grandma would bathe me, the hand shower pouring out a sharp spray, the bubble soap oozing higher and higher to my nose.

Leaving the bathroom, after standing on the toilet lid to pull the release chain, I would wander across the hall to my grandparent's bedroom where I was allowed to dip into the Elizabeth Arden powder with the big fuzzy powder puff and smell the perfume. I



LYNN BALL, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Anne Shmelzer

would open the tube of lipstick and examine the luscious fuchsia red.

I could smell the Elizabeth Arden that night, coming from Grandma's dressing table, filling the still air of that special August evening. My brother is in a small twin bed, perhaps a cot, placed against the wall, parallel to the great bed of our grandparents where I am cuddled in the deep feather mattress.

We are waiting for our father to arrive. I know we are waiting for him to arrive from the war because my brother keeps reminding me every few minutes. He whispers, "He's coming soon

my father had done it for me. The sketch had been for me, I was sure.

I must have slept because it is dark except for the coloured light from the stained glass fixture in the hall. A long, thin shaft of burnished light stretches across the burgundy carpet from the door to the bay window.

"He's here, he's here!" my brother whispers and I can feel the very lump in his throat. "Be quiet, don't say anything! He's coming in the front door. He's wearing his army boots. He might have his gun. He'll be wearing his uniform. He will be marching. Be quiet. He's coming up."

There must have been other sounds because I have been told the entire family was there and went down to the armoury to bring my father home. But I hear only footsteps, creak, creak, creaking up the stairs. My father is coming!

A figure is silhouetted against the light. It enters the bedroom, cautious, silent and apologetic. A male form stands above us, between my brother and me and I know it is our father. I sense immediately the familiarity of this distant stranger who has voyaged from some far-off place to come back here to be with us. This intimate newcomer standing between us, who brings with him a queer mixture of love, faithfulness and fear.

Would he be as Mamma had taught us? Would he ever leave us again? could he possibly love us? Would I be welcome in his heart? There is a guarded sound to the breathing of all three of us. He leans over me and I feel the softness of his kiss, his bristly moustache, the prickle of wool against my cheek, wetness on my other cheek and soft, measured breath.

"Hello my Anne, hello my Sandford." Again a long spell of silence. "I didn't want to waken you." Words evaluated carefully. Sentences across several thousand miles of sea. "See you in the happy morning." Disappearance and then sleep.

Was this a happy reunion, after five years of absence? At 2:00 a.m.? After a non-stop train trip from Halifax? After the band had finished playing at the Toronto armoury?

My aunt, 52 years later, told me, "Hundreds of people were there. Down at the armoury. Everyone was trying to find their loved ones. I've never been in such an emotion-charged crowd, before or since. There were tears, excitement, anger, and surprise. It was electric."

Mother remembers now, at ninety years of age, "the moment of meeting, the feeling of pressure, of not knowing how to act or what to say, of being afraid but of being grateful of having him back alive. So many had died, so many of us were alone, mothers and children all alone."

For me now, these are the images from that August night in 1945. Sunset, my grandparent's bedroom, the sound of cards smacking down a game of solitaire, the smell of Elizabeth Arden, my brother singing Danny Boy, the softness of feathers, the song of the robin, the whispers of anticipation, the light of stained glass, footsteps, the kiss, the burn of army wool, the moisture of his tear. His soft apology.