

The S T O R Y

Behind the Story

notes from
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Are the Pill Hill Stories True?

My Pill Hill stories. Are they true? Yes and no. They are not true in that each and every fact is not true. I'm creating a story not a documentary. I invent scenes, change names and create dialogue in order to tell my emotional truth.

Imagine Picasso having a cousin who says, "Pablo, paint a painting of me." Picasso paints a man with five ears and six noses; the cousin says, "That's not me." Pablo replies, "That's the way I experience you." My Pill Hill stories have six noses and five ears.

And yet they are close to the bone. I did in fact grow up on Pill Hill, a neighborhood filled with doctors on the edge of Boston. My parents, who were teachers and had little money, had the style and gumption to buy a thirty-two-room house built by Charles Storror of Storror Drive in Boston. Frederick Law Olmsted, the great landscape architect, designed the grounds and included a cave, which I loved as a boy.

In 1942, when I was seven years old, I got eyeglasses and the next day at school the older students dubbed me "Big Ears Four Eyes." I was stunned and hurt by the stereotype. A year later, in 1943 in the middle of World War II, my uncle, my dad's brother, married Ann Yoshida, a Canadian Japanese woman. Shortly after that I heard that my new Aunt Ann had been spat at in Cambridge, Massachusetts because she was "a Jap." So war, for me as a little boy, meant that your aunt is spat at. The image of those two moments, "Big Ears Four Eyes" and Aunt Ann being spat at, became the basis of my first Pill Hill story. Those images burned deep inside me. I invented a scene so the listener could feel the pain Aunt Ann must have felt when she was spat at. That's my job, to let the listener experience both my emotions and the emotions of the characters. In the process of creating *Glasses*, I discovered that images both guide me and touch on the mystery of



The Pill Hill house of Jay's boyhood.

life.

My latest Pill Hill Story, *The Labyrinth of Uncle Mark*, explores the cost of my "Uncle Mark" and a Canadian Japanese woman marrying in the middle of World War II. It was a frightening time to be Japanese in the United States. The two of them took on the world. The Mark character is considered the family failure, but is he? Or were he and his wife Romeo and Juliet writ large? It was only when I faced my own failures the story of Mark came alive.

A painting is a painting inspired by something. I think of my Pill Hill Stories as paintings—they are their own world.

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 ARE THE PILL STORIES TRUE?
- 2 A SLICE OF APPLE PIE
- 3 JUSTICE FOR RICHARD SITCHA

New York City Celebrates Diane Wolkstein

For forty years Diane Wolkstein has told stories at the Hans Christian Andersen statue in Central Park in New York City. In 1967, Diane joined the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation as a recreation director, where she initiated a storytelling program, telling stories to children and adults twice a day, five times a week, in playgrounds all across the city. This past June, New York City held a great celebration of Diane's forty years of telling stories.

One of the joys of being a storyteller has been knowing Diane. I remember celebrating Diane's birthday a few years ago in her apartment in Greenwich Village. There were four of us there, all storytellers: Diane, Gioia Timpanelli, Laura Simms and me. Diane had cooked a delicious meal and we were eating in such a leisurely fashion we might have been in Italy. At one point, Gioia, a superb conversationalist said, "Let's



Congratulations Diane Wolkstein

talk about love." For hours we ate and relaxed and talked about love in our lives, love found and love lost. It was one of those nights that float through time. Diane's quicksilver mind and her sense of fun and play were all alive that night and they've been alive all these years for people around the world. Bravo, Diane!

Diane's website: <http://www.dianewolkstein.com/>

Teller in Residence – A Slice of Apple Pie

In June I was Teller-In-Residence at the International Storyteller Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee. The light is beautiful on the old brick buildings on Main Street in Jonesborough, and Wednesday night I kept walking up and down Main Street taking in its mystery. The handsome old brick buildings looked as if they were about to tell stories to the courthouse across the street. Jonesborough is filled with stories and storytellers.

Friday afternoon I told the story of *Father Joe* at the theatre. The story is about my uncle, Father Joseph T. O'Callahan's bravery aboard the USS FRANKLIN when it

was bombed by the Japanese in the Pacific during World War II. My uncle became the first chaplain in the history of the Navy to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. The captain of the Franklin, Les Gheres, said "Commander O'Callahan was the bravest man I've ever seen."

After the story a listener, Joyce Newman, and her husband, Richard, came up to speak with me because they were taken with the story. They said that Richard's father, Yale J. Newman, served on the USS TICONDEROGA, an aircraft carrier in the Pacific in World War II. Joyce went on to say, "My

wardroom when the call to quarters came. My father-in-law took a few extra seconds to grab a leftover piece of apple pie as he headed toward the stairs. At that moment a kamikaze hit the ship and the officers who had left before my father-in-law were all killed."

I thanked Joyce Newman for this amazing story and then went to have ice tea with Susan O'Connor, Director of Programs for the center, at The Thistle on Main Street, a delightful café with wooden floors and brick walls. A moment later Richard and Joyce came into The Thistle and Richard said, "I've got my father on the cell phone. He'd like to talk to you." I took the cell phone and was talking to Yale Newman who was alive because of the apple pie. Yale said that he had personally delivered orders telling Les Gheres he was to leave his position on the TICONDEROGA to serve as the captain of the FRANKLIN.

So there in The Thistle I was reminded again: Jonesborough is a town of stories.

husband's father was an officer and he was eating dinner in the wardroom with several officers on the TICONDEROGA. They all got up to leave the



Main Street, Jonesborough, Tennessee. Photo by Bill Kennedy

Justice for Richard Sitcha

When I'm in town I visit Richard Sitcha, who is at the Plymouth County Correctional Facility. Richard has never been charged with a crime but has been in jail four years. Richard is from Cameroon in Africa. He's 45 and fled Cameroon in April 2001 after he had been arrested and tortured for revealing the government's role in the murders of nine young men (the Bepanda Nine). He was granted asylum in the United States January 16, 2003. On September 18, 2003, his asylum was revoked and Richard was made part of Homeland Security's "Pilot Program" of incarceration during adjudication. His first lock-down was with hardened criminals at Connecticut's maximum security prison in Osborn. There he was beaten so badly he had to be hospitalized.

How can this be? Richard is lost in the system. He's waiting for his case to be reviewed and hopes he will not be deported to Cameroon because he fears he'll be executed there. He's a warm, delightful man and would appreciate letters. You can also write to your congressman asking that Richard be freed and given asylum here. If you write a letter to Richard, the address has to be exact to reach him. His address is: Richard Sitcha - 39823, E1 #210, Plymouth County Correctional Facility, 26 Long Pond Rd, Plymouth, MA 02360. You can also google "Richard Sitcha" for more information.



Richard Sitcha

Boston Globe Obituary Helen O'Callahan: founded finishing school

by Emma Stickgold and Erin R. Conroy, Correspondents

In his children's book *Orange Cheeks*, internationally renowned storyteller Jay O'Callahan describes the protagonist's mother: "She was like the wind in a yellow suit, and her voice stretched like elastic." Like many of his works, the book was autobiographical, and the mother he described was his: Helen (Gately) O'Callahan, a bright, captivating woman who, with her husband, had founded a school for young women in Back Bay and was known for entertaining Boston luminaries in her Pill Hill home in Brookline.

"It was that sense of swirling — she would come home from the school carrying bags of groceries and thinking about supper, thinking about a gathering. That energy deserted her only in the last two years." Mrs. O'Callahan died Aug. 2 of coronary artery disease. She was 94.

The Wyndham Secretarial and Finishing School was an elegant building on Marlborough Street, where Mrs. O'Callahan and her husband, Edward J., taught aspiring secretaries more than how to increase the number of words they could type per minute. They had a vision: They wanted the young women to have an in-depth educational experience, so they offered classes in a wide range of liberal arts subjects, including dramatic arts, literature, sociology, and philosophy. The school's catalog said students should be able to "talk intelligently about Shaw and Shakespeare, Ionesco and Salinger."

Mrs. O'Callahan and her husband bought a 32-room house in the historic Pill Hill section of Brookline in the mid-1940s that was affordable because many potential buyers feared the cost of heating such a large home during wartime. Many a political debate was staged in the O'Callahan home, where Mrs. O'Callahan's lobster newburgh, creamed cod, and lemon meringue pie were legendary among guests who included writers, artists and doctors. When guests arrived, Mrs. O'Callahan would not wait long before asking one of her signature questions: "What're you reading?" Sometimes, Jay O'Callahan said, it would even precede the word "Hello."

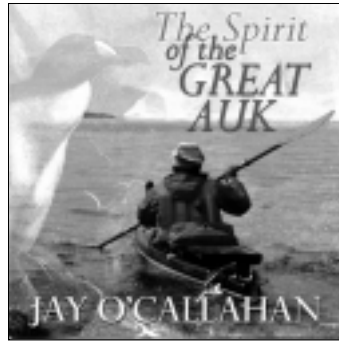
Born and raised in Cambridge, Mrs. O'Callahan graduated from Cambridge High and Latin School and then from Emmanuel College in the early 1930s. After graduation, she put her sense of style to work as an assistant buyer at the French Shop in Filene's.

And she was not shy in her favorite outdoor activity. She loved to leap into the waves off the coast of Maine. She would call out, "Great water! Great water!" Jay O'Callahan said.



Dick Wheeler, Champion of the Sea

In 1991 Dick Wheeler kayaked 1,500 miles from northern Newfoundland to Buzzards Bay on Cape Cod. I tell Dick's story in *The Spirit of the Great Auk*. Now Dick is working with Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary. The Stellwagen Bank's research vessel has been named The Auk in honor of Dick. The sanctuary looks to protect the living and non-living resources located in the sanctuary, but also attempts to support traditional uses of the ocean. Dick Wheeler continues to work for the environment. In September, Dick paddled his kayak from Provincetown, Massachusetts to Scituate, Massachusetts and beyond, to raise awareness about the plight of the sea. *Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary website: <http://stellwagen.noaa.gov/>*



The Spirit of the Great Auk CD

Last Fall China, This Fall New Zealand

This November, I'll be going to Invercargill, South Island, New Zealand, to tell at the Invercargill Storytelling Festival. The last two times I traveled to New Zealand I was moved by the rituals and warmth of the Maori people. At that time I promised myself that when I went back I would ask my wife, Linda, to come. She's coming. In China I found the thousands and thousands of bicyclists haunting. They were the ritual of the beginning and ending of each day. In New Zealand, it is magical Liz Miller, the Maori and the beauty of the land I look forward to.

An Experiment with Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton, monk, writer, poet and activist gave talks to the young men training to be monks in the 1960s. The talks are informal and insightful. I'm beginning to learn some of Merton's talks and would like to present them. If you're interested contact my office.

IN BRIEF

In February, **Connie Regan-Blake** went to Kampala, Uganda, to tell stories, conduct workshops and gather life stories. She was invited by BeadforLife, www.beadforlife.org, a non-profit organization which helps women lift themselves out of extreme poverty by selling their beautiful handmade jewelry. *Connie's email: Connie@storywindow.com; website: www.storywindow.com*



Connie Regan-Blake and Grace, a Ugandan Interpreter

This past June my writing group, **Spoken Voices**, broadcast our stories on WATD, a South Shore Massachusetts radio station. We may be the only writers group in the country to regularly read our works on radio. *The Boston Globe* listed us as a "Best Bet" for that night.

Gwenda Ledbetter's one-woman show, *Friday's Father*, is extraordinary storytelling and superb theatre. In *Friday's Father*, Gwenda tells of a 1930's girlhood full of fairytales, mischievous girls, magical neighbors, sheltering trees, and an alcoholic father. Gwenda is a winner of the 2006 Oracle Award from the National Storytelling Network. *Gwenda's email: bahpu@aol.com*



Gwenda Ledbetter

Three CD's I have recently enjoyed and highly recommend are: *Jataka: Stories and Music of Buddhist India* (dougmack@crocker.com); *Return Again: Stories of Healing and Renewal* by Devorah Gordon Zaslow (dvorat@aol.com) and *Tales of Now and Zen* by Motoko (motoko@folktales.net) • www.folktales.net).

Bill Harley won a Grammy for his CD, *Blah Blah Blah: Stories About Clams, Swamp Monsters, Pirates & Dogs*. Congratulations! Bill is one of the funniest and cleverest storytellers in the country. *Bill's email: bill@billharley.com; Website: <http://www.billharley.com/>*



Bill Harley