

Behind the Story: *All for One – Love, War, & Ghosts*

My senior year of high school I was corresponding with Andy while he served a second tour in 'Nam as a Marine. Also during those months, the massacre at My Lai became public knowledge, and a month before I graduated, protesting students were gunned down by the National Guard at Kent State. Gap years were not a thing then, but I took one.

Vietnam loomed so large in our lives. We'd been brought up with movies glorifying the heroics of World War II and Hogan's Heroes making even a prison camp look like a day in the park. When the movie *M*A*S*H* came out in early 1970, it was based in Korea and, while it had plenty of humor on top, underneath was the gritty realism of a MASH unit trying to keep young soldiers alive. When the Pentagon papers were published in June 1971, protests increased. In June 1972 the photo of the "Napalm Girl" was first published and public sentiment against the war solidified. We signed the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973 and by March 1973 the last American ground troops were pulled out of Vietnam. However, by the terms of the Accord, Americans were still able to provide logistical support to the Republic of Vietnam. Military personnel were limited to fifty, so most of that activity was staffed by civilian contractors.

Vietnam vets had never been greeted with enthusiasm. Then Saigon fell in April 1975. On top of everything else, veterans had to deal with the fact that all their sacrifices had been for naught.

In 1981, I decided to write a book with characters dealing with the aftermath of that war that was never declared a war. I read a stack of books by veterans and others to understand my characters. That spring, I rented a Commodore 128 for a month and wrote the book. In May I flew to NYC for the ASJA conference. I got to hear Alex Haley and Mary Higgins Clark speak, and I took a workshop on pitching, then pitched my novel (a first draft) to real NYC agents! My timing was right. The July 13, 1981 issue of *Time Magazine* would devote the Nation section to "The Forgotten Warriors."

Two of those NYC agents requested the novel. Back then, they asked for the whole thing rather than a few pages. So I printed out a copy on continuous feed paper and made photocopies to mail out. I got one form rejection and one that said he liked my writing but there were too many characters in this story. I didn't realize that meant I should call and ask how soon he wanted a revision. Besides, the computer had been returned and I didn't have anyone encouraging me to write. So I got busy with life.

I moved six times. Still, when I got my first paycheck for writing in 2005 and started writing seriously, that original paper copy with the perforated edges was still in a file box. I read it – and it had too many characters! I'd been trying to tell too many stories at once.

Running Away seemed more urgent. But *All for One* kept calling me. When I started revising it last year, it was still hard to get Vietnam vets to talk about 'Nam. So, instead of leaving the story in its original time, I decided to age my characters to reflect the lasting effect of war on those who fight and those who love them. It didn't have to be Vietnam; win or lose, war is never a glamorous endeavor. At its best, it is necessary.

Behind the Story: *Running Away – Maggie’s Story*

My first “real” job after college was as a probation officer. Most of my caseload was teenage girls on probation for petty offenses, but the main concern was that they were out of control, lying all the time, and flaunting their sexuality. At least one girl claimed to have been sexually abused by a male in the household when she was younger, but no one believed her.

Later, I became a child protection investigator/caseworker. One of my first cases was a teenage girl who was completely out of control. She flaunted her promiscuity, stayed out all night, and lied a lot. Numerous times the night shift got a call from her father asking for help getting her to come home. Two women in our department had taken specialized training in sexual abuse; when they were on night shift and got her, they knew how to put her at ease and she disclosed she had run away from her mother to live with her father due to sexual abuse by her step-father. It was severe enough there would be criminal charges against him, so I was instructed not to ask her about it. Repeating the story too often would make it sound rehearsed and she might not be believed.

Well, I hoped they knew what they were doing, because I wasn’t inclined to believe anything she said – until the day it went to family court and the step-father’s attorney asked why there was no hospital report. I told him, as far as I knew, there had been no hospital visit. (It was too long after the abuse when she disclosed for that kind of evidence.) The relief on the step-father’s face told me everything she said was true. I used that moment for Peg.

Sexualized and “out of control” behaviors are a common reaction to sexual abuse. By the time the victim discloses, their credibility is in question. And what parent wants to believe the choices they’ve made led to that kind of trauma? I told this story in both voices, hoping moms and daughters in this situation will read and understand each other a little better and start communicating. That’s why there are supplemental materials for therapists included here.

Behind the Story: *Peg's Story* - *Detours*

In *Running Away* I placed Peg in Harrisburg during Hurricane Agnes, June 1972, because I'd been there with my fiancé and it gave me a familiar locale for that novel. When I started writing Peg's story, I decided to include some other notable events of that time, fictionalizing them for backdrop to her story. Some samples are:

- The first Gathering of the tribes of the Rainbow Family was held the Fourth of July weekend that year, near Granby, Colorado. Harrison "Not Ford" Gruman loaned me his original copy of *The Rainbow Oracle*. Per the Rainbow Family website, it is one of 5000 distributed to leaders and people on the street to invite them to that first Gathering. The story timeline required moving it to Labor Day.
- The meteor Peg sees as they drive to California was inspired by an article in Wikipedia about an unusually large meteor: 1972 Great Daylight Fireball. I moved it from August to September as they drive west from Granby, as a possible sign for Peg.
- When I was researching September 1972 in Sacramento, I ran across a Sacramento Bee article describing how bereft the city was after a plane crashed into Farrell's Ice Cream Parlor near the Executive Airport on September 24th that year and realized Charlie was going to lose Cheryl and Amy.
- On October 28, 2000, Bill Clinton signed the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act. I had to have Peg mention it when I realized the timing of the story's end. That act has been updated several times since and there are international laws as well.

Sometimes a character takes over the writing. Peg did so when she got to the bus station in Erie. I was shocked and stopped writing – until I saw a PBS special interviewing women who had been trafficked and realized that was Peg's story and it needed to be told. When coercion or abuse are involved or when it's a minor, it is not prostitution, it is trafficking – a form of slavery.

Language does make a difference.

Behind the Story: *Tough Times*

When my father was a kid, there were still signs saying “No Irish need apply.” As a “Mick” who grew up in rough surroundings, he used Archie Bunker’s vocabulary for people before Archie existed.

By the time I was a teenager, Dad had worked his way up to a top executive position in a major corporation and my mother had talked him into *borrowing money* to own a house in the suburbs. He’d just finished paying off the fifteen-year mortgage when a black family moved in across the street. It was the 1960s and “block-busting” was the term used when the first black family bought a home. Dad thought the neighborhood would decay and he’d lose the largest investment he’d ever made.

For ten years, since my maternal grandmother’s death, we’d been weekend farmers. Mom had saved enough to build a new house that summer. When a neighbor said her friends would like to buy the house for twice what he’d paid fifteen years earlier, we moved to the farm. I graduated from the same small-town school my parents had attended.

Dad probably never knew I’d walked to school with the boy in that house one day. He was a year ahead of me and friends with the boy who’d moved out. We both had the same French teacher. He was a very middle class boy – the *only* difference was his skin color.

In the small town, I was not supposed to date Italian boys.

As years passed, I ran into Italian men who asked after Dad and spoke fondly of how he taught them how to play basketball at the YMCA. I realized he had always looked on people as individuals. His prejudice was class-based, born of his own struggle to move up from poverty. Eventually, he welcomed an Italian into the family.

As my kids grew, they had friends of multiple ethnicities, all of them pretty much middle class. I taught tough kids in small town, city, and reservation schools. They all inspired Michael because they showed me environment and situation mold people far more than any large label – and family dynamics more than anything else.

Michael’s a middle-class kid dealing with one major traumatic event after another. His racial heritage is the reason the kids have never met their grandparents and it complicates things at other times. But Michael is comfortable with himself, so it’s not a core issue.

A posthumous thank you to Dad, the inspiration for Michael’s grandfather, and to Fred Foote, who read the book and assured me I hadn’t stuck my white foot into it too badly writing about this boy.

Behind the Story - *Alice*

Every year, there's a 3DayNovel contest, where you sign up to write a book in three days. I'd read one of the past winners and liked it, so in 2011 I gave it a try.

I started the weekend with the opening paragraph, a narrator, two strong characters, and a vague idea of what might happen.

Following the 2008 financial crash, corporate investors were scooping up foreclosed homes as rentals. The dream of owning a home was slipping away. Flash mobs of various kinds were in the news. So I did have serious intent as I started writing, and while the narrator is a kid, it's not a kid's book any more than *Huckleberry Finn* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Then Jack got out of that cab and the voices of Helen Hunt and Jeff Bridges took over the characters (without their permission). They had me laughing out loud as I rushed to keep up with their banter. The first draft of a very short humorous novel with a serious message was done within the weekend.

All these years later, home ownership is still out of reach for many and homelessness is at an all-time high. Hopefully, as you read this, the federal programs I included as resources still exist. Hopefully, some readers will be motivated to take action.