

Essays by
Sharon DeBartolo Carmack



*Inheriting
the
Gordon
Hips*



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Scattered Leaves Press
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Family Lore

I WANTED TO BE FIRST IN LINE, so I stood alone on the blacktop perhaps ten minutes before the bell rang. While I waited, I felt my bladder growing urgent. I had plenty of time to make it to the girls' restroom before the bell, but two things stopped me. First, I didn't want anyone to usurp my place in line. Second, I hated squatting over a public toilet seat. My mother had warned me about nasty germs I'd catch if my butt touched the seat.

So while the other kids played kickball, my physical education came while doing the "I gotta go" dance. It's similar to old-style Irish step dancing, where, in a limited space, you alternate picking up one foot then the other while you hold your arms loosely at your sides. In between steps, I crossed my legs and squeezed my upper thighs together. When I thought no one looked, I pressed both hands against my crotch, hoping to push the pee back up into my kidneys. At the end of my little jig, certain my efforts were successful, I stopped, only to feel the warmth of urine running down the insides of my thighs.

Mortified, I prayed for a cloudburst so my puddle on the black pavement wouldn't be as obvious as an oil slick on the surface of the ocean. Any other child might have simply moved away from the pond at my feet rather than expecting divine intervention. But I wasn't terribly bright, and besides, moving meant giving up my place, first in line.

My Kindergarten classmates responded to the metal reverberation of the bell and came running to line up behind me. "Hey! Where'd that puddle come from?" someone asked. I shrugged and might have said, "It rained," although I saw no cloud in sight. Yellow pee had seeped into my white cuffed ankle socks, and I stood with my legs apart, so my inner thighs and underpants would dry quicker. The ammonia odor wafted around me. How much more obvious could it get? The kids would be making fun of me for days.

The next morning I developed a "stomachache" and didn't want to go to school. Had I known this stomachache excuse had been used for centuries by other children, I might have come up with something

a little more original. The bubonic plague, perhaps. Evidently my mother had used the stomachache excuse herself at one time or another and knew the symptoms. In tears, I confessed my shame of the day before. She reassured me that accidents happen and said that no one would even remember the incident. I trusted her and went to school. No one mentioned it. I slept peacefully that night; I no longer needed to figure out how to convince my parents that we must move to Siberia.

This childhood trauma could have faded from my memory or stayed buried so deep that it would have taken a pack of cadaver dogs to uncover it. But my mother lied when she said no one would remember. During my adolescence and into my adulthood, it was she who took great delight in recounting to friends and relatives, in my presence, the story of the day I wet my pants at school. She embarrassed me more than my classmates ever had. She told how I refused to use the school restroom—why, she claimed, she had no clue—and how I would run home from school, charge through our red front door, and head straight for the bathroom.

Out of all the childhood stories she could have told, this was her favorite. She could have told how I came home from school frantic one day. The elementary school nurse had sent home an Important Note with all the students. I showed my mom the note—after relieving my full bladder—and warned her, “Someone’s breaking out people’s headlights.” My mother looked confused, but not as confused as I when, after she read the Important Note, she marched me straight to the kitchen sink to wash my hair and examine my scalp.

Or she could have told about the time I played alone in my room, probably dislodging the heads from my dolls, not long after our move from New York to southern California. Mom hollered from the kitchen, “Sharon! Stop jumping! You’re making the whole house shake.” Granted, my body shape resembled Winnie the Pooh’s, but I didn’t have enough mass yet to cause tremors and rattle the dishes at the far end of our ranch-style house. “I’m not jumping!” I yelled. Later, my mother discovered we had experienced a geological phenomenon most New Yorkers weren’t accustomed to: an earthquake. When you’re an only child, you get blamed for everything.

No, by far, she enjoyed telling the Sharon-wet-her-pants story. My face flushed hotter with each rendition. As I grew older, say in my forties, I finally mustered the courage to say to her, “You know, it was your

fault. Wasn't it you who told me, 'Don't sit on the toilet seat?'" Yet that didn't garner any sympathy or stop her from retelling the story.



My sixty-four-year-old mother and I sat at her kitchen table. The walnut wood grain held memories, not of meals, but of my childhood wardrobe. I could still see the leaves extended, the full surface covered with fabric, the beige onion-skin paper of Simplicity or McCall's patterns pinned to the cloth. Her pinking shears growled against the wood as she cut around the pattern's edges, infusing the air with fibers and the smell of new, unwashed material.

My mother, a professional seamstress, had bought the dining table, with its leaves that stored under each end and snapped into place when she pulled them out, for her sewing. That it could double as a place to eat was a bonus. Just as she had created whole dresses from pieces of fabric that originated on this table, I sat here now gathering pieces of her memory to stitch together her life story.

Mom set a mug of black tea for me and black coffee for her on the gold plastic placemats she'd bought in the 1970s. I eyed the mini-cassette tape recorder to make sure the tape was running. In my career as a professional genealogist, I had conducted many oral history interviews with clients and their relatives. I realized that I should do the same with my parents. When I had suggested weekly sessions to my mother, surely she was eager to stroll with me down memory lane; I dismissed the groan she emitted as gas. After a few sessions, I could tell she looked forward to our mother-daughter time, as did I. We finally talked about something other than the weather and soap opera storylines.

It's difficult in some ways to interview your parents, because you know most of the sensitive issues. From past experience, you know what subjects to avoid, what areas cause a parent to say something like, "Don't you have homework to do?" "Ma, I've been out of school for decades."

When I'm interviewing clients about their lives, I don't know what memories haunt them. While this frees me to ask questions about topics a relative might instinctively avoid, I'm never certain when I'll be treading in an emotional mine field that will trigger tears. I remember asking one client an innocent enough question—"What were you doing when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?"

I looked up from my notes and saw tears streaming down the woman's cheeks. I had no idea her brother died during World War II.

I don't like making people cry. It makes me uncomfortable, and I'm not sure what to do when it happens, other than to shift in my chair and look around the room for a box of Kleenex. I have no idea how my therapist copes from week to week. I certainly didn't want to make my mother cry, so I kept away from sticky topics, like my father. My father had divorced her when I was thirteen, and since then, he had been *persona non grata* in her life. I stuck with safe questions about her grandparents, parents, and Aunt Janey—her mother's sister, who had raised her and her siblings while their mother worked.

"I remember going to a party for a neighborhood kid, Carmen," my mother said, her youthful carrot red hair now faded to a strawberry blonde. "I don't remember how old I was, I guess ten or twelve. We didn't have much money, and anyway my aunt had forgotten about the party until the last minute. I didn't have a gift to take, but I wanted to go. So Aunt Janey gave me a bunch of bananas to take! She said, 'If you wanna go, that's what you're taking.'" The creases on my mom's face deepened with her laughter. "I wanted to go," she insisted to me, "because I wanted to have cake and ice cream. So I took the bananas."

I imagined the birthday girl and her friends, all giggles when they opened the door, excited to greet the next guest holding a gaily wrapped birthday present. And there stood my mother, a bunch of bananas in her hands, not even a bow on them.

"Did Carmen like the bananas?" I asked, surprised that she actually took them to the party.

"I don't know. I didn't think it was so bad when I first took them over. We were poor, and I thought everybody was poor. But then the kids started laughing at me. Now I can laugh about it, but I was so embarrassed at the time."

What a great story, I thought. I asked her to tell it many times again after that. I wasn't sure whether I enjoyed it so much because bananas were such a silly gift to take to a birthday party, or because I could relate to her discomfort when the kids laughed at her. Or maybe it was because I liked seeing my mother laugh. I didn't recall her laughing much as I grew up.

I never thought to ask her whether she had told Aunt Janey how embarrassed she'd been at the party. Or whether Aunt Janey had prolonged the agony by retelling the tale at family gatherings.



I tried, once, when my daughter was in her mid-twenties to record her memories. Why wait until someone's elderly, when their recall isn't as sharp? Laurie loves to talk about herself, so I thought this might be the easiest interview yet. I'd open an artery and out the words would flow. The idea sounded good to her. We sat on the couch, me with my list of questions. I started the tape recorder. I began with a more recent memory, the weeks she lived in Ireland after graduating from college.

"After we said goodbye at the airport," I said, "tell me what you were feeling on the flight. Were you nervous or excited?" The interview went well until Laurie realized that it can be tedious to remember and recount all those details. The interview session lasted about twenty minutes. So I've collected stories here and there when we talk on the phone.

"What's your most embarrassing childhood moment?" Laurie laughed when I asked and said it happened in fourth grade. She had done something to her plastic chair, she couldn't remember what, maybe had gotten black marker on it, but she didn't want her teacher to find out. Mrs. Meyers, she told me, kept students in from recess when they misbehaved, and that's the last thing Laurie wanted to have happen. Laurie sat in the back row with three others, one of whom was absent. She decided she'd switch chairs with the absent student next to her and pondered in all her fourth-grade wisdom how to accomplish this without attracting Mrs. Meyers's attention.

"I decided to lift the empty chair up and over me while the teacher's back was turned," Laurie said. "Then I'd set it down on the other side of me and scoot into that chair. I'd slide my chair over and no one would ever know. As I lifted the chair, the legs caught on the American flag that extended from the wall. The more I tugged, the more the legs became tangled in the flag. I lost my grip, and the chair came crashing down, taking the American flag with it."

"You never told me this," I said, both of us laughing. I could visualize my ten-year-old daughter executing this stunt.

"I know. I was too embarrassed," she said then continued. "So now everyone's looking at me. Everything in the classroom stopped. No one said a word. After a few seconds, although it felt like ten minutes, Mrs. Meyers said, 'OK. So where were we?' and went back to teaching as if nothing had happened. She could see my face burning, and I think she felt bad for me. Everyone in the class followed her lead and acted like nothing happened. She didn't even keep me in for recess, but I still felt mortified."

Laurie said it had haunted her for months afterward. Part of me felt bad that she hadn't come to me, that she suffered alone. It also saddened me that I'd been excluded from a piece of her childhood at the time. And, I felt rather hurt that her most humiliating experience didn't include me. Hadn't I embarrassed her enough?

Had I not asked the question, I might never have known about this incident. I wondered what else about her childhood I wasn't privy to. As parents, we think we are the primary keepers of our kids' childhood experiences, yet once they are in school, they are out of our company for the bulk of the day, creating memories that don't involve us.

Laurie's discretion was probably for the best. If she'd told me about her sitcom scene then, I'm sure I would have tried, most likely unsuccessfully, to hide my smirk, to reassure her that everyone does or says something dumb, and that the feeling would pass. That one day, maybe twenty or forty years from now, she, too, would laugh at this. I can't help but wonder, though, if I would have entertained family and friends with the tale, torturing Laurie over and over again, just as my mother had done with me. I'd like to believe I would have shown more compassion, but maybe not. It was too funny not to repeat. Besides, it triggered my own childhood gaffe: trying to rationalize the puddle on the playground for my classmates.

Our experiences were different, separated by three decades, but I could relate. Kids' logic and problem-solving skills are timeless, making them stories we love to retell. I envied Laurie; it took her far less time than it had me to learn how to laugh at her herself. Then again, she didn't have a mother who kept reliving the moment for her.

I had never understood why my mother, the woman who supposedly loved and cared about me more than any other person on earth, could have been so insensitive and find humor in something that humiliated me. I had to think like a family historian to understand it. We repeat stories, albeit sometimes at our children's emotional expense, to keep memories alive. Parent-child relationships—and sibling relationships, too—are united by this shared past.

No wonder some of us dread family gatherings where these stories never die. But family historians love them. The tales link generations. Some are funny to remember, others painful, but they often transcend the ages. They remind us that others in our family also had faults and failings, as well as courage and daring. Times change, but people's desires, needs, and emotions don't.

It felt like my mother was laughing at me, but I wonder if her intent was to teach me how to laugh at myself, to not take myself so seriously. The ability to laugh at oneself doesn't come naturally; it's a learned, and sometimes bestowed, trait. Some people never master the skill. Perhaps, too, by retelling my embarrassing moment, my mother cemented a fragment of my childhood in her heart and mind, keeping it safe and protected from a fading memory.



What survives about a person's life through family tales intrigues me. I'm curious about what people choose to remember among a lifetime of relics and what we repeat about ourselves or our predecessors for posterity. During oral history interviews I've conducted, some people portray themselves or their forebears only in the brightest beam of light, as brilliant and full of wisdom.

A few think they can control their reputations after they're gone, or that of their long-deceased ancestors, by editing out unfavorable stories from the family record. They want the memories to be of their good deeds, not missteps or inadvertent childhood silliness like taking bananas to a birthday party, tangling chair legs in the American flag, or peeing on the playground.

Memento mori was a common epitaph on colonial-period headstones, meaning "remember you will die." This warning to the living prompts me to wrap up interviews with this final question: "What do you want to be remembered for?" People will be remembered for different qualities, of course, depending on whom you ask, but I think it's interesting to know, before it's too late, how someone views herself and what she wants to be remembered for. Most say they want to be remembered for being a loving husband, wife, mother, father, sister, brother. For being a good provider or a caring, giving person. For living a Christian life. No one has ever said to me, "I want to be remembered for my sense of humor." Maybe I've interviewed only serious people. I want to be remembered for making people laugh.

After my mother died, I pulled out the interview transcripts of our kitchen conversations all those years ago. I felt disappointed to discover that I had never asked her that question. It's probably just as well. She might have said she wanted to be remembered for being a good mother, and I would have laughed and said, "Seriously?"



I was in my early fifties before I could laugh at that little girl who wet her pants on the playground. Laurie, my fiancé Jim, and I were having dinner at my mother's. As Jim was a relative newcomer to the family, I'd thought for sure my mother would regale him with the Sharon-wet-her-pants tale. We'd finished dessert, and my mother hadn't yet launched into the story. While I cleared the sewing table, a part of me felt relieved that I had escaped center stage. Then I heard coming from *my* mouth, "Ma, Jim hasn't heard the story about me wetting my pants at school."

What was I doing? Was I actually encouraging her to dredge this up yet again?

She began her rendition, and when I walked back into the dining room, I saw my mother's eyes glistening with happy tears. She laughed through the words, and her face, wrinkled from decades of smoking, appeared smooth and youthful to me again. Her graying strawberry hair seemed radiant, the fiery red I remembered from my childhood.

After all these years, her motivation for repeating that story no longer mattered to me. All that mattered was how it amused her to tell it. I remember thinking then that when she is gone, this will be the one story I will always hear her telling. This memory, told and retold, was part of our family lore. Sitting back down at the table, I laughed along with her, laughing so hard that I nearly wet my pants.

