

DIVING INTO FIFTY



A Collection of Stories
That Got Me Here!

By Ana Hays

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This book is dedicated to all the people and events that have inspired my stories. And thank you Barbara Norris, my cheerleader from afar, for asking Santa for a collection of my writing.

BELIEVE IT'S POSSIBLE!

Like millions of Americans, I love baseball. However, unlike most fans who are loyal to one team only, I have a wacky sense of loyalty—rooting for teams in cities where I've lived. I love my memories of baseball games—afternoons and evenings spent with friends in Comiskey Park (Chicago), Pac Bell Stadium (San Francisco), Dodger Stadium (LA) and Wrigley Field (Chicago) drinking Bud Lite, eating hot dogs, yelling for home-team homeruns, throwing back opposing balls in Wrigley Field, and singing along with the deceased and legendary baseball announcer Harry Cary for the 7th Inning Stretch.

To illustrate my wacky sense of loyalty, consider this year's baseball season where I broke a cardinal baseball rule—switching loyalty from the Northside National League Chicago Cubs to the Southside American League Chicago White Sox. Northsiders don't root for Southsiders, and worse yet National Leaguers don't swing over to the American Leaguer side. Secretly I've always rooted for the White Sox. Could it be their cute butts in black and white uniforms and a stadium with fabulous food? But this year I could contain my secret no more. I came out of the closet the day I discovered that the White Sox were 15 games ahead in 1st place. This was no small feat considering that for the past 88 years a World Series title had eluded them. There were seasons of near misses, serious losing streaks and the infamous 1919 World Series scandal against the Cleveland Reds that left them nicknamed the Chicago Black Sox. They'd obviously forgotten how to win. But why?

Sports page in hand, standing by the water cooler at work one day, I looked up to find a fellow White Sox fan, Paul. "The White Sox are going to win the World Series this year."

"Right," he said. Skepticism buttered his voice. "They've let us down too many times for me to believe that."

"I know, but this year, Paul, is different. I can feel it. They're on a mission from God." He patted me on my shoulder, smiled and walked away leaving me with "my feeling."

Steadfast in my belief throughout the season, the feeling never wavered even when their losses started piling up. "They're gonna win Paul," I assured him by the cooler several Fridays later before an onslaught of weekend games.

"I don't know," he grumbled walking away this time with no smile or reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"Maybe they've needed a rest," I called after him. Fast forward to November and I'm sitting in a café writing this article while wearing my White Sox World Series Championship ball-cap; my shiny new *Believe It! The Story of Chicago's World Champions* keepsake book sits beside my computer. And I'm wondering why did the White Sox winning the World Series mean so much to me? Why am I moved to tears every time I think of them—the team that came out of nowhere to do what few believed possible.

Looking back I know that I was watching a team wrestle their inner demons—longstanding, self-doubting beliefs that they were a tainted team and maybe didn't deserve to win. That day that I saw them in 1st place I knew without a shadow of a doubt that they had made the decision to overcome those demons. Something had snapped. They had decided they had to have that champion-

ship trophy. Contemplating my own demons, I wondered what moves you beyond your inner lies. Perhaps it's a paradigm *shift* in the psyche. A point where the subconscious says, "Enough already, we're done letting those devastating lies we buy into run our lives. Let's get over it and move on."

We've all prayed for those moments—where the light bulb goes on and the lie is illuminated. And when the lie is exposed it can no longer rule our lives. We can finally move forward and hit our own homeruns.

For me, the Chicago White Sox proved that inner demons can be dispelled and that with faith I can change my life if I want to. All I have to do is believe it's possible!



Ana Hays, Baseball Fan

THE DNA OF IDENTITY

It was Friday, the last day of my month long real estate training class and I had to decide: was it worth being late for Starbucks, or could I make it till lunch without my iced coffee? Choosing Starbucks, I was relieved to find only one guy in front of me as I bellied up to the pastry counter pleased to see blueberry scones.

“I ordered more blueberry scones like you advised,” the barista said.

“Great!” Lately they’d only had fat-free scones by the time I arrived.

“Not !” Mr. Barista exclaimed handing me my scone. “Yesterday I threw some away.”

“Bummer!” I grinned, batting my eyes. “But good for me.”

Stepping to my left towards the register, I encountered the man in front of me staring at me. Seeing he was handsome, and my height, I smiled as he looked away to pay for his drink. As he turned to walk to the other end of the counter to wait for his latte, he glanced at me over his shoulder and smiled.

Flattered, I paid for my order and made my way towards him to find him heading towards the side door. As we passed one another, our eyes met and for a moment he looked as though he might say something. But he didn’t and I watched through the window as he made his way to the end of the patio, turning every couple of seconds to look back at me. Arriving at a table where a woman was waiting, he moved the chair that sat beside her around the table and sat across from her. A business meeting I gathered.

“Iced coffee for Ana,” brought me back to earth and as I added half-and-half to my drink, my mind raced wondering how I could meet him and what would Dana my new friend from my real estate class do? She’d proclaimed it her mission to find me a boyfriend and if she were there, she’d tell me to give him my business card.

Grabbing my wallet, I frantically sifted through the compartment where I usually carried my orange “writers” business cards. Ugh! I’d given Dana my last one the previous day for her to give to someone else. Gaping into my purse in disbelief at my misfortune, my eyes rested upon a pack of black and white cards held together with a rubber-band. Wondering what they were, I curiously lifted them from my bag and saw that they were my new Alain Pinel Realtors business cards. Running my index finger over the smooth glossy cardstock, I remembered—I’m a realtor now.

Time stopped. The world around me went silent. I had reached in my bag for the old me but the orange card person wasn’t there anymore. And the person on the black and white cards—I didn’t recognize her yet. Confused, I became cognizant that I felt a void within me that was vast—the DNA of my identity hadn’t completed metamorphosis yet.

At the end of March, I ended what felt like a four year sojourn and returned to the San Francisco Bay Area not anticipating the need to re-adjust to a place I had lived before. After joining Alain Pinel Realtors and participating in their month long Masters Program, which they require new agents to attend, I realized I had compartmentalized what transitioning from a “career employee” to an “independent contractor” would feel like. Staring at my new business cards, I was reminded that next

week was the beginning of my new life. And I was scared. Where I wondered had I found the courage to move to Maui four years ago; leave Maui two years later to house-sit from Portland to San Diego for nine months until I decided to explore living in LA; and how was I going to find the courage to launch my real estate career next week? I had no idea.

Pulling a card from the rubber-banded stack, and taking a dollar bill from my wallet, I gathered my drink, scone and purse, and turned to find a female Starbucks crew member sweeping the floor near the door.

Stepping forward to approach the woman I asked, "Will you do me a favor?" She eyed me suspiciously.

Undeterred, I continued, "Do you see that man sitting outside in the blue shirt?" She turned to look over her shoulder and nodded. "Would you give this to him please?" I handed her the card and folded dollar bill.

"What's the dollar for?" she said taking them from me.

"That's your tip." And smiling I took one last look at the blue-shirted guy and with butterflies fluttering in my stomach walked through the room and out the front door.

ISN'T PARADISE SYNONYMOUS WITH PEACE?

The clock on the wall went tick tock, tick tock. It was 12:46 am. What was I going to write about? For days I had contemplated the theme "Paths to Peace." Deadline looming and desperate for an idea, I abandoned the other word document on my computer with the 11 aborted first paragraphs for a fresh new blank page. I was no closer to a column on inner peace than I was to going to bed. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I write? And worst of all, who was I to be writing about peace through stories about my life.

Peace, peace, peace! Where does one find peace? I think I became a spiritual seeker because I was trying to find peace. First I looked for peace by going back to the Catholic Church. I found peace in the rituals, but tired of being called a sinner, which tipped my peaceful equilibrium and so I moved on and became an Episcopalian.

Episcopalians are more open-minded than Catholics. They let everyone take communion and being reminded that I was a sinner wasn't the first thing I heard in the Sunday service. My mind was peaceful for a time, but I grew restless and decided to experiment with Siddha Yoga by chanting and meditating with Gurumayi. Meditation was good and quieted my mind and I had some mind blowing emotional breakthroughs by receiving Shaktipat from the Guru. But one day the Big Voice started speaking to me and told me I didn't need a Guru anymore. "Maybe," he said, "you ought to find a way to go within by yourself."

So I skipped off to Maui for a two-week vacation and Breathwork workshop and ended up staying for two years; a common occurrence among seekers who venture off to Maui. Trust me, there's nothing like marooning yourself on an Island surrounded by thousands of miles of ocean to get you to go within. If you can't find inner peace on paradise, you're screwed.

So I found myself working for a best-selling self-help author. Answering his phone, I invariably encountered Mainlanders whose voices cracked as they realized they were calling Hawaii. "Oh, you're so lucky," they'd stammer as I imagined their minds imaging our miles of white beaches. "You live in Paradise."

Realizing one day that paradise was synonymous with peace, my replies began to be determined by whether or not the author was in the office or by my current frame of mind. On a good day the innocent caller might hear, "Trust me when I tell you, find paradise where you are and where you live right now. Paradise isn't all it's cracked up to be." Depending on whether they were sitting in subzero temperatures in Minneapolis, Minnesota, might determine their response. But that's neither here nor there.

Eventually Maui got too small and so my seemingly previously peaceful mind became agitated and I went to live in Los Angeles. Lord knows; if I could find peace in LA, I could find peace anywhere. But how does one find peace with bumper to bumper traffic; helicopters hovering over your neighborhood every other night with search lights searching the streets for some perpetrator; and women with facelifts everywhere reminding me that I wasn't getting any younger and would I someday succumb to the knife for a little *Nip/Tuck*?

Aghhh! Was Peace eluding me? Had the Peace Train left me behind at the station?

It's 3:00 AM and suddenly I remember a call I received a few months after I left Maui.

The caller, a woman who had recently moved to Maui, was lonely and looking for connection. Having stumbled on my article in *Maui Vision*, she had sensed a kindred gypsy spirit in me. Lonely as well and flattered that she had called, I graciously answered her questions and pointed her in the direction of where she could find a community of welcoming individuals on Maui. Thanking me for my time and the information I shared with her, she paused. I waited. Then with a quiet voice she asked, "Do you think I will ever find a place I can call home?"

Without thinking, I blurted, "Of Course! But you have to make the choice to stop moving." "Oh!" She replied.

And so it is with peace, isn't it? Peace isn't something to be sought after. One must choose to be peaceful and to be vigilant with oneself to remain that way.

COUNT IT ALL JOY!

Traffic began merging from four lanes into two on the I-84 heading from the 880 west to the 101. Decreasing my speed, I yelled, "Please God! Not today!"

A mile from the Dumbarton Bridge toll booth, we came to a stand-still. The dash board clock read 12:50 p.m. No way would I make it to the church in ten minutes. I considered stomping on the gas. "Relax Ana," I told myself. "No one's expecting you."

Reaching into my purse, I pulled out a newspaper clipping I'd taken from my writing workshop the previous Thursday. Teresa, our facilitator, had laid out ten to twenty obituaries on the ottoman and given us a "writing prompt" to write a secret about one of the lives. Standing over them, I glanced quickly at the pile and spied a picture of a pretty woman—circa maybe 1940 something—smiling up at me. Snatching it up, I returned to my large comfy chair and settled in to read about Judy.

Born in 1921, Judy was an accomplished pianist, violinist, singer and composer at a very young age. In the 1930s, Judy was awarded first prize in a songwriting contest resulting in one of the most famous big bands of that time performing her song. She went on to college, had a professional singing career and a radio show.

"Geeze," I thought. "How is it that some people find their career and purpose so early in life? And she was a woman in the 1930s and '40s to boot!" Feeling a twinge of envy, yet wanting to know more, I continued reading. Judy eventually retired from her career, raised five children and at 49 surrendered her life to Jesus Christ and began composing and recording songs that reflected her faith. But then at 51 she suffered a serious stroke resulting in paralysis and loss of speech. My eyes welled with tears as I realized she had lost her ability to do what she loved. Reading to the end, my eyes rested on the memorial service date. Next Thursday! I had to go.

Creeping along towards the toll booth, I contemplated what it must be like to lose an identity and what was mine? Right now, I had many. I was someone who's late and a realtor who wants to be a full-time writer or better yet best-selling author someday. Identifying myself as a sad and depressed person most of my life, I'm inching my way towards becoming a more joyful person. And I'm single and confused because I'm always questioning who I am in life. Finally reaching the toll attendant, I handed him four dollars, asked if waiting was free, and floored the gas peddle wondering, but what about Judy. A stroke had snatched away her singer/songwriter identity. How did that make her feel?

Arriving at the church at 1:30 p.m., I hoped I hadn't missed too much of the service. Grabbing a program from the table in the vestibule and slipping into the sanctuary, I felt like an interloper.

"You're just like Harold and Maude," my friend Barbara had teased me.

"Who are they?"

"You haven't seen that cult movie?"

"No!"

"It's about memorial service crashers."

“I’m not a crasher. I’m curious. The obituary was in the paper and it inspired me. I have to see who this woman was and how she handled God’s curve-balls in life.”

Certain no one had noticed me; I settled into my seat; second pew from the rear and began listening to Annie, Judy’s daughter, read her eulogy. As Annie spoke, I glanced at the program in my lap and smiling up at me again was a picture of Judy with her husband James. Clearly much older than 51 when the stroke had altered her life, she looked radiant and happy. How could that be? The caption under the picture read, “Count it all joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” - James 1:2-4.

Listening to Annie and those who followed, learned that of course Judy’s spirit had been tested and that like all humans there were times when she felt down. But instead of allowing her losses to define her and choosing something like anger, she had chosen to live her life counting everything as Joy. Wiping my runny nose, I had to find a way to stop questioning life.

“Stop it, Ana, right now!” A voice thundered from within. “Can’t you see how a questioning identity gets you nowhere? There’s nothing to find. Just choose what you want to be. And if you forget, then remember the choice you recognized in Judy’s smile.”

After the service, I introduced myself to the family. Eventually heading towards the door to leave, the woman who had hugged me during the reverend’s eulogy called out my name. Turning towards her she said, “I hope you have been blessed.” Waving, I smiled and nodded my head. She would never know how much.

THE FLAVORS OF WANTING

Standing in front of my bathroom mirror, my eyes fell upon the piece of paper I had taped to the wall on my left with an affirmation scrawled in my handwriting that read, “I am perfect for this position and this position is perfect for me.” Even though I’m not one for affirmations, this one given to me by my energy healer, resonated with me. And every time I spied it while in the bathroom I repeated it out loud over and over again. Smiling and chanting it, I went on about the business of putting on my makeup.

Two weeks prior, I had received a phone call from a pleasant voice. “We’d like to schedule an interview with you.” From approximately 8-10 interview time slots (who can remember) I chose the third to the last one and began the process of preparing for my interview and the patient game of waiting. Today having risen at 5 a.m. to make final preparations, I felt as ready as I could ever be. My green notebook, which I would bring along, was organized with yellow post-it notes marking pages containing the job description, website for the program I would be managing, my current snazzy one-page resume and former two-page version; my questions to ask the panel of interviewers, and anticipated questions that they might ask me. In addition, I was bringing along my prized possession—a thick black portfolio containing brochures from a program that I had managed similar to the one I was now interviewing for. Did other people show up to interviews with show and tell? I hoped not.

In this moment, I felt electric. In my entire career, I had never been so excited to interview for a position. Tingling with anticipation, I felt calm and collected with a knowing that every job I had ever held until this moment had prepared me for this one. My hand paused mid-air from applying mascara to my right eyelashes. Staring at my reflection I marveled: You’re actually admitting to yourself Ana Hays, that you really want something. This wasn’t typical of how I normally walked through life.

Sure, I’ve wanted things and gotten them—like the time I told God I wanted a new car within six months and didn’t care how I got it. A near death experience in a car wreck a few weeks later and I got my new car. Then there was the time I decided it was time for me to leave Maui, but I didn’t know where I wanted to go and friends gave me their home for four months on the mainland to sit and figure it out. And of course there are the little things, the new shoes, purse or book.

But then there are the other wants like wanting my parents to say, we love it that you love living in your native California and understand why you don’t want to move back to the Midwest. And then there was wanting my birthmother to meet with me; but she refused. And then there’s the wanting my bio-dad to stop keeping his relationship with me a secret from his wife who already knows about me. And then there’s the wanting to find the guy I want to walk through the rest of my life with.

These wants of mine, some unattainable and others out of my control—have become disappointments I have resigned myself to. And in so doing, I now realized I had become numb to wanting. Why is it, I wondered, do some wants happen and not others. Maybe that’s why I felt so strongly

that, the book *The Secret* was a bunch of bull.

Slowly outlining my lips with my lipstick pencil, the electricity of wanting coursed through my veins. Getting ready for this interview, felt like getting ready for a first date. I wanted this job. And it occurred to me that the process of applying for the job and preparing for the interview had catapulted me beyond the un-requited-wanting-hard-knocks of life. Wanting, I mused, must come in various flavors. And maybe that stupid Mick Jagger song was right? “You can’t always get what you want. But if you try some time you just might find, you get what you need.”

Pursing my lips after applying my lipstick, I stepped back from the mirror to admire myself and concluded, who cares! All that mattered now was that I felt passionate about this job because I wanted.

ONE WITH THE BALL

The ball sat perched on the tee waiting for me to whack it; knees bent, butt extended awkwardly behind me; arms held in what felt like a contorted position; hands gripping the neck of my three iron; thumbs lined up perfectly with the arrow conveniently incorporated in the design of the plastic grip covering for novices like me to align my grip. The only thing left to do now, was swing.

It had been at least 13 years since I had last held a golf club. A herniated L-5 disc had brought an abrupt end to my budding tennis and golf games. Living in Chicago at the time, my girlfriends and I had added golf to our portfolio of outdoor activities that would attract eligible men. I preferred tennis to golf. As a person with a competitive spirit and latent killer instinct, it was easier for me to see who I was competing against as I stood tennis racket in hand waiting for my opponent to lob the ball back from the other side of the court. Golf on the other hand, appeared to be all about chasing little balls down a fairway and the only person I could see who I was competing against, was me. Where pray-tell was the fun in that?

“It’s not just about chasing balls down a fairway,” men have told me. Golf requires skill—a consistent swing. Besides you’re outside, with your buddies; you’re so focused nothing else matters. And you’re competing with yourself and all the variables of the course.”

And I might add, “That *little ball*. Plus patience, something I lack.” How I wondered on those past occasions trekking from fairway to fairway was I to find the focus to hit consistently for 18 holes. Sometimes though, my ball left the tee with a delicious whack. The kind where people turn to watch as the ball soars gracefully towards the intended green. But those kinds of hits were few and far between. So when my back surgery temporarily ended my golf career and was followed by a move to California, I gave it up without hesitation. But then 14 years later, I met a man!

“You have to take me out to the driving range to hit balls with you,” I excitedly informed my colleague Michael one Monday morning after a date.”

“But I thought you hated golf.”

“I don’t hate it. I just don’t understand it. There’s a difference.”

A believer in only doing things because you want to do them, he eyed me suspiciously. “You’re not just trying to impress him are you?”

“Noooo! I’m going to use it as an opportunity to understand the relationship between me and that *pesky little ball*.”

“Do you have clubs?”

“Not anymore!”

“He rolled his eyes and smiled. “Well since you’re tall, I’ll lend you a set of mine.” That settled, we set off the following Saturday to the Palo Alto Muni to practice at the driving range. Clubs falling from my bag as I walked, Michael turned to see what all the noise was about.

“You’re carrying your bag wrong. Carry it this way with the club heads in front of you. You sure you want to do this?”

“Yes!” I mumbled turning my bag around as I heard the sound of a perfect swing hitting a ball. My

stomach churned. "I'm just nervous."

"Don't be. It'll come back to you. Just remember to keep your head down when you hit the ball."

Standing over my ball, mind racing, I wondered how *it* could come back to me when it had eluded me before. Then I remembered Bill Murray in *Caddy Shack*. "Be the ball." Be the ball, I thought. Better yet, "I am the ball," Quietly I began chanting my new mantra. Then it occurred to me, what if I added "I'm one with God." Suddenly my mind went silent and I was overcome with a deep calm. Feeling my body align itself with the calmness, I swung my club. With one of those perfect sounding smacks, I raised my head to see my ball heading straight down the driving range.

"Wow," Michael exclaimed from behind me. "That was awesome."

"Thanks," I said reaching forward to place another ball on the tee. Again I chanted to myself, "I am the ball, I'm one with God," until I felt the same calmness settle in to my body. Then I swung again with another delicious smack; and another ball headed straight down the range.

Although pleased with myself, I was smart enough not to be fooled into believing that I'd be this lucky consistently. And bending down to pick up another ball, I smiled acknowledging my new relationship between me and the pesky little ball.

THE BIG VOICE

“So, how are you,” Joe, asked from across the table at Maria La Cantina in Walnut Creek. In town from Virginia on business, he was a dear friend from high school.

“Um,” I replied as I shoved a chip with salsa into my mouth to stall for time. Chomp, chomp! “Let’s say that this year, so far, might rank close to the crappiest year of my life. But I’m hopeful that it’s going to get better.” We chuckled together as I picked up my margarita to wash down the remains of my chips with a big gulp.

“How crappy is crappy?” Joe asked?

“Well,” I paused shoving another chip into my mouth, “my marketing communications business has been affected by the real estate market and taken a nose dive. My writing workshop attendance seems to have gone south for the summer. I’m finding that looking for a job is more daunting than I remembered. And, well, in the midst of it all, just when I thought I’d hit rock bottom, my boyfriend decided it was best to break up.” I picked up the margarita glass again and took a slow deliberate sip. “That about covers it.”

Joe remained silent. I could see the wheels of his mind churning while he contemplated a reply. He’d always been a contemplative kind of guy. Someone I had relied heavily upon during college to get me through emotional rough patches. Invariably the phone would ring when I’d hit my lowest low, which was often. One night in particular it rang at 3 am.

“I had a feeling you aren’t alright,” his voice said all the way from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A mess in Ames, Iowa, I wondered how he’d known.

“You know,” I continued before he could respond, “The worse thing about it, is this.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m not hearing The Voice.”

“What voice?”

“The Big Voice; the one I heard in 2002 when I got laid off with a severance package. Remember I went to Maui for two weeks. And at the end of those two weeks, this BIG booming voice reverberated inside of me saying, ‘Stay. STAY! Take time off and write that book.’ So I stayed for nine months in order to write and to attend the Maui Writers’ Conference. And then as the nine months came to an end, I heard it again. ‘Stay through Christmas.’ And I did. Then it had the audacity to ask me to move my things over from the Mainland. I wasn’t sure why, but I trusted there was a reason. And for two years I stayed waiting for it to speak again. Eventually IT did and that’s when I came home.”

“You didn’t like Maui?”

“It wasn’t that. I’m not a beach person.”

He rolled his eyes. “Come on. Where was the good?”

“Always looking on the bright side?” He nodded.

“I became a writer; worked with some amazing best-selling authors; made life-long friendships

with some awesome women.” Pausing, with glass in hand, I turned to stare out at the creek outside the window and then into the traffic whizzing by on the distant street. From there my mind wandered down the highway five miles south to my former boyfriend, Bruce’s house. What was he doing, I wondered? I missed him.

“What else,” Joe asked yanking me back from the ledge I was precariously hanging from with my wandering mind.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure I gained some inner peace and a better sense of who I am.” I winked. “But right now, I’m mad. With everything in my life going side-ways I want to hear The Big Voice again. And I can’t hear it anymore.”

“Maybe you’re screaming too loud.”

“WHAT?” The couple at the next table turned and immediately looked away. Joe laughed.

“Have you tried prayer?”

I winced. “He doesn’t listen.”

“Yes he does. You could do a Novena?” A devout Catholic, it figured Joe would suggest something like that.

“Listen, Ana. The voice never goes away. Sometimes it’s booming and other times it’s a barely audible whisper. But it’s always there. Praying a Novena might help you to hear IT. But here’s the thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You have to say it without attachment to hearing The Big Voice.”

Arriving home, I Googled the Hail Mary, which even born as a Catholic I couldn’t remember and which Joe said I needed. Riffing through my nightstand drawer I found the rosary Bruce had brought me from the Vatican and I sat down on my bed and began to pray.

THE LAST DANCE

Sliding into my car seat, I grabbed my Bluetooth and pushed it into my ear. Abiding by the new California law requiring hands-free driving, I grabbed my cell phone, quickly dialed Eric's number, and dropped the cell on the seat beside me. His number rang as I pulled out of the parking lot, maneuvered on to Hwy 101, and headed south. Glancing at the clock on the dashboard, it was 2 o'clock.

"Are you on the road?" Eric asked as he answered the phone.

"Yep, I'm my way to San Luis Obispo to celebrate the Fourth with my Kindergarten friend, Josh, and his family. Where're you? Sounds like a wind storm."

"In a parking lot waiting for my friend Jill. We're on our way to interview Ram Dass."

"Cool! So what's up with the deadlines?"

"Well first, I wanted to give you some feedback."

"Okay!" I held my breath.

"Some readers have shared with me that your last few columns have been downers."

"Really?"

"Yeah! So I'm thinking you could write something more like a *Chicken Soup for the Soul* story. *Maybe something inspirational?*"

Stunned and thinking of the serendipitous call I'd received only two hours earlier from a reader who had wanted me to know how much my story, *Plant Yourself in A Bigger Pot*, had meant to her as she'd grappled with the decision she'd made to live on Maui, I tried not to feel too hurt.

"You still there?" Eric asked.

"Yes!"

"Can you do that?"

"Sure," I replied hoping I could and thinking of my *Chicken Soup for the Adopted Soul* story about meeting my birthmother on the day she died.

"Great."

For the next two hours, having only time and the steering wheel in my hands, I thought about my writing for *Maui Vision*. In 2002, when I arrived on Maui, I had come for a Manifesting Your Vision workshop. Signing up for it, I had no idea that simultaneously I would have just been laid off. With my world in pieces, I had to figure out what to do next. Maui seemed like a great place to do that, so I stayed for two-and-a-half years to figure it out. What I knew for sure at that time was that I wanted to become a published writer.

Stumbling upon Maui Vision Newsletter one day after I'd settled in to Maui, I called Eric and pitched him a story about Katherine Lilledahl, a breath worker. He accepted the idea, I was thrilled, and my writing career was launched. At some point over the years, my stories landed on Page 3 and began to transform into personal essays about my life as a spiritual adventure. As I wrote, I decided I wanted to write openly and honestly about the trivialities of grappling with my life. I had this feeling that I wasn't the only one out there questioning life and that maybe others might see themselves in

my words and that maybe those words might bring comfort and inspiration to them. Through calls, cards and emails I found out my hunch was right.

As I continued to drive on Hwy 101, observing the camel-colored mountains, I couldn't shake my interpretation of Eric's and my conversation and that my recent writings had been construed only as depressing. Sure, I agree that there is an element of sadness in my writing, which has stemmed from what seems to me to be an endless search for love and the desire to find my place in the world. But it's been my hope that beyond the sadness, that some readers have seen humor, and breakthroughs of awareness, and just maybe a glimmer of hope.

Suddenly, Donna Summers voice bellowed in my head. *So let's dance, this last dance "Oh my God," I thought. Yes, of course, Eric's request might be a good one. But for now, I know that I'm not capable of writing happier Chicken Soup for the Soul stories. And maybe what this request really is about is the Big Voice telling me I've lingered too long dancing with Maui Vision magazine and that it's okay to finally let go of my dance partner, Page 3.*

Thank you Eric, Maui, and all of you, who I know have been avid readers. You mean the world to me because you have inspired, supported and encouraged me as I've embarked on a writer's journey. My gratitude for you is endless. It will carry me forward, and I will always remember you. Mahalo!

IT WAS YOU

Death and love are the two wings that bear a man to heaven. –Michelangelo

Standing beside my birth mother's hospital bed, I noticed that her glazed eyes had suddenly become lucid. Turning to see what she was staring at, I looked at the white wall directly behind me.

"Renora," I whispered to her sister-in-law, "Anita is seeing something."

Peering from her vantage point at the end of the bed, Renora craned her neck. "Oh, honey," she spoke softly, "she's been staring like that ever since she stopped talking."

Convinced Anita was seeing something beyond the white wall, I turned again. An avid *Touched by an Angel* fan, I had come to believe that angels appear to those in need, and surely to those who are dying.

It was noon on Sunday. I had arrived in Duluth the day before. Renora was standing outside Anita's hospital room waiting for me. Having taken the first morning flight from San Francisco to Minneapolis, I had driven the 180 miles northeast to Duluth on a cold, sunny, snow-covered morning. Renora saw me exit the elevator. She rushed toward me, greeted me, and ushered me into the sixth-floor waiting room that overlooked the frozen Lake Superior.

"I thought it'd be best if we took a moment to get acquainted and for me to explain Anita's prognosis to you," Renora said. Her kind demeanor comforted me. I was nervous, unprepared for this first meeting with her and my birth mother.

"When I spoke with you on Wednesday, Anita was still able to speak, and we thought that she might be getting better. But since then, she's taken a turn for the worse. They've given her morphine for the pain, and she hasn't spoken a word since Thursday."

"Do the doctors think she'll make it?"

"I'm not sure at this point."

A nurse popped her head into the waiting room, and Renora introduced me.

"It's so nice to meet you. I'm sure Renora has told you your mother is not well. And, actually, the other nurses and I aren't sure what's keeping her alive." The nurse smiled sweetly, as reassuringly as one can when delivering disconcerting news.

My head dropped. I stared into my hands. "I'm glad you came," Renora continued. "We did not tell Anita that you were coming. As I told you over the phone, we begged her to let us tell you she was in the hospital. She was adamant about not wanting you to come, but I think it's best that you did. When we called, we wanted you to be able to choose. I hope this won't be too hard on you." She paused. "Let's go see her."

I walked up to the bed and looked down upon the woman who had given birth to me. An oxygen mask obscured most of her face. Her hair, tousled from lying in bed, was a dark shade of brown, with only a touch of gray at age fifty-nine. Sitting on the chair next to her, I stared through the side-bars of the bed into her glassy eyes.

"You look like her," Renora said as if reading my mind.

I spied Anita's hand cupped under her chin. "Look, Renora. Her hand is just like mine."

"It's time you told Anita who you are." She smiled reassuringly while nodding her head.

Breathing deeply, I stared into my birth mother's big brown eyes, the exact color of mine.

"Anita," I hesitated, "it's Ana, and . . ."

Anita began to shake violently. Terrified, I looked at Renora. "I think she's having a seizure!"

"Please don't think it's because of you."

But I knew that it was.

Renora turned to the door. "I'll get the nurse."

I took Anita's hand. She looked up at me, meeting my eyes, then became still. Now what?

What do you say to the dying woman who birthed you, but you've only just met? Gathering my wits about me, words began to flow.

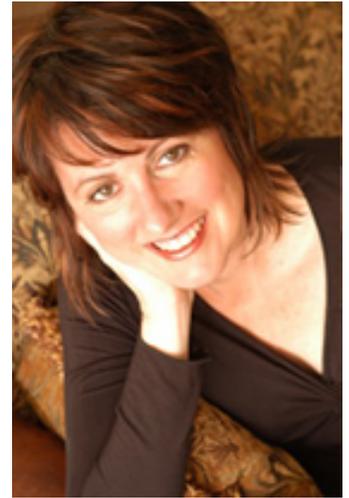
"Anita, I'm Ana. I know you didn't want me to come. But I wanted to meet you, to thank you for giving me up for adoption. I have a wonderful family and a nice life. I want you to know that I am happy and that I love you for your courage." I paused. There must be something else. Then I remembered the wall and a story my adopted mother had shared with me about my grandmother at her death.

"Anita, I know you're seeing something, and I want you to know that they are angels. And that one of them is your mother. She's waiting for you. Don't be afraid."

Three hours later, with Renora and me by her side, praying for the angels to come and take her, Anita died. Standing over her body, I marveled at her peacefulness and the soul I had felt leave the room.

A nurse came to prepare her for the move. As she bathed Anita's face with a washcloth, she turned to me.

"Now I know why she stayed alive as long as she did. She was waiting for you."



With a creative and business writing background, Ana Hays' writing has appeared in *Chicken Soup for the Adopted Soul*, *Walnut Creek Magazine*, *Sybase Magazine* and other publications.

Hays also leads creative writing workshops in Menlo Park, California; at WomenCare a non-profit organization in Santa Cruz dedicated to offering a safe haven for women who are making the cancer journey; and for SPARK where she inspires students to follow their dreams of becoming a published writer.

