

**YES, YOU'D BE A GREAT PET SITTER:**

***Letters to Jennifer***

By Suzi Schmidt

Dedicated to my sisters, Pat and Faye, who encouraged me to write about my experiences with animals. And to my niece Jennifer, who will be a great pet sitter.

I'd like also, please and thank you, to dedicate this to the kitten who wrote my favorite poem in Francesco Marciuliano's wonderful book, *I Knead My Mommy*:

Looking Good

. . . . .

Lick

Lick

Slobber

Lick

Lick

There

Now all your left arm hairs

Are pointing in the same direction

And they glisten

And smell of seafood surprise

And you're welcome

"Without you, Heaven would be too dull to bear,  
And Hell would not be Hell if you were there."

Stolen by a dog named Rosie Jackson  
for her playmate Flower, who is not yet two,  
and fighting for his life

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## Author's Note

I've been writing since 7<sup>th</sup> grade, when I tried to pull out what unrequited love feels like on the inside. Almost autistic with grief and pain, my heart breaking and flooding the pages with tears and words, I tried and tried. And then one day I saw a sentence that was, as Annie Dillard describes it, like "a bomb" going off in my lap.

I yelled. "Yes! That's it. *I wrote that!*" I was so happy. So vibrantly alive. The poet e.e. cummings explained it: "I imagine that yes is the only living thing."

I don't remember much about whats-his-name, but I know that that was the moment I fell in love with sentences.

When I received a letter from my niece Jennifer asking me about pet sitting, I was taking care of two Jack Russell terriers named Lucy and Ethel, a Siamese cat named Nameless, and an aviary full of birds. When Jennifer asked if I thought she would be a good pet sitter, I yelled "Yes!" so loudly that Lucy and Ethel started barking, the birds screeching, and Nameless knocked over a lamp in a mad dash to safety in the dryer. I couldn't wait to write to her.

I hope this book of letters will encourage others who would be great pet sitters. At the very least, I hope it will be read by people who will like some of my sentences. Writing is hard work – even when it's a labor of love. I wouldn't do it if I didn't think it would be fun. My idea of humor may not appeal. I almost rolled off my bed when I read Oscar Wilde's "I was working on the proof of one of my poems all morning, and took out a comma. This afternoon, I put it back in."

Download this Work-in-Progress free on [www.SuzithePetSitter.com](http://www.SuzithePetSitter.com).

If you send your email address to [suziaboard2005@yahoo.com](mailto:suziaboard2005@yahoo.com), I'll send you each letter as it is written.

A very dear, very sick little dog named Flower needs help with his chemotherapy bills. If you can donate anything to <https://www.gofundme.com/flowers-fund-coton-de-tulear>, please do so now. Thank you.

May, 2016

Dear Jennifer,

Thank you for the lovely birthday card. Your letter was such a pleasant surprise. So many questions!

Yes, I think you'd be a great pet sitter. What's more, I think you're a natural. I know how much you love animals. I know you're honest, intelligent, reliable, hard- working. Most important, you always try to do the right thing.

You would love this. Most of your clients would be very successful, incredibly busy people, doing some amazing things, who love their pets as they do their other children.

And the animals! Some are happy, healthy, fun-loving balls of fur that throw themselves into your arms with, "Give me love! Give me all that you got!" at the top of their voices, every time. It never gets old. Others may (or not) trust you when they see that you are kind and gentle in a world they know can be cruel and treacherous. Not one of them will be boring. You will find that tortoises will feel your slightest touch. That 5% of the cats you meet are allergic to people and don't know it. You may walk a huge Rottweiler who melts whenever he buries his nose in black-eyed-Susans, or a beagle who swoons at the smell of narcissus in the spring. And if you arrive at work to find that a python is not in the case, look up, not down. She is probably enjoying the sunny view from the window, wrapped around the curtain rod.

I hope your decision is yes. The world needs you. Reminds me of when years ago I asked a funny friend, "If I could give you a pill that would keep you alive forever, would you take it?" She said, "Oh, honey, Yes! The world needs me! You give me that pill and we'll find another one for you later!"

You will know, when animals let you into their world, that you are asking the right questions.

With Love

Aunt Suzi

June, 2016

Dear Jennifer,

I'm delighted to hear it. I envy you, at square one, starting a first business in an industry no longer in its infancy. Help is available to you everywhere - libraries, bookstores, online. And yes, I'm glad to answer what I can.

"Why?" did I decide to do this, is easy. When I retired after 30 years of nursing, I tried and couldn't remember a single day that I had had any fun. Now I count on it every day. A dear friend, a very successful pet sitter, said, "Come to work with me for one day, see what it's like. You'd love this. Believe me, it's not lonely at the top." I advise you to do the same. You will know then if it's right for you. For me it was a "Houston, we have lift-off" moment. If it is Yes, then do 3 things:

Go to [www.petsitters.org](http://www.petsitters.org). The National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (NAPPS) is an organization dedicated to promoting excellence among pet sitters. Membership dues - \$135 per year.

You can then purchase, from Business Insurers of the Carolinas, at NAPPS's group rate, a tailor-made liability insurance. (\$385 per year) And you need a bond. (\$50) The \$570 is all tax deductible. Keep every receipt from this moment on.

Get some brochures made, preferably at a local printer, or at Home Depot or Staples. (You may use mine.) I started with 1000. Also some business cards (500). While you wait for them, get your car serviced and shined. Buy a map.

I know that you've heard, Go Big or Go Home. Forget that. Start from home and drive as far as you'd like to travel to work. I drove 15 minutes, stopped, drew a full circle on the map with my home at the center. Decision time...I talked to my faithful friend, my car, and as usual heard what I wanted to hear, "It's a good idea. I've got gas. You got a friend." I put a brochure in every paperbox on every road we could find. Also every bulletin board, pet store, and business that would let me. It took weeks, all the while remembering the African proverb, "Never test the depth of a river with both feet." Car said, "Putz (fool), between us we have six. How many feet do you need?" I worried that people would think I was too old. It was possible that I had already missed my chance. "I Am old. And I'm alone!" Car was offended: "What am I, chopped liver? Snap out of it."

It was Muhammad Ali who did it: "Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing."

And the phone started ringing. And the fun began.

Enjoy!

Aunt Suzi

July, 2016

Dear Jennifer,

Yes, to get started, do that - borrow any car that is reliable and presentable. You will need to get one *that you like*. It will be far more than transportation; it will be your constant companion, your sounding-board, movable office, make-up room, snack bar, and sometimes your pet taxi. Mine has become Detroit's version of a favorite song, "You Got a Friend." Car likes disco music (Sirius XM 54 radio), also Yiddish slang (for some reason), and funny bumper stickers: "If you can read this, I've lost my trailer" is our favorite.

I urge you to study your roadmap. Memorize it, learn the shortcuts. I love the line, "the road to a friend's house is never long" but I'll bet there is a shortcut. You and I live in the world's largest deciduous forest, so we will always have to get around downed trees after storms, early morning unplowed snowdrifts, rush-hour traffic, and school bus stops set in stone.

Car reminds me often about what's certain..."every two miles it's a dollar off your taxes." Bumper sticker: "Sometimes you're the bug, sometimes you're the windshield."

Thanks for the interesting questions: My "favorite job" is housesitting with the animals. When you are actually living with the pets, you can really get to know one another. Most of them like the extra attention, and you have more time to enjoy them. And their house, the library, artwork, collections, heirlooms, gardens, neighbors.

Also, you have time to watch some incredible specials on TV. One extraordinary experience, which I would probably have missed, was life-changing. For two years the History channel produced and aired "Alone." Both seasons were addictive. Ten experienced hunter-gatherers were selected, given basic equipment, plus a rapid-response emergency call-button. They were taken to separate coves in the forest of Vancouver Island, off western Canada, where they agreed to video tape their experience. They could bring 10 items from home, but no food, water, books, phone, radio, or writing material. The last one standing won \$500,000. I rooted so hard for those strangers - worried, swore, yelled, suffered, for 55 and then 64 days. And I rejoiced with the remarkable winners. What a special, satisfying adventure we have had. They said it had changed them (did me) and most of all, that they had been forced to really know themselves. D.H. Lawrence wrote about it years ago.

This is what I believe:

That I am I...

That my known self will never be  
more than a little clearing in the forest.

Love,

Aunt Suzi

August, 2016

Dear Jennifer,

Most of the truths that we hold to be self-evident, aren't. For example, "Keep It Simple, Stupid" isn't even close:

You'd think an ad/logo on your car would be smart money well spent. Yes, but a passing thief reads, "Family not home in the daytime." Solution: Get a removable magnetic logo. (Vistaprints.com.)

It is true that you won't have to buy a lot of new clothes. Yes, but invest in very sturdy slip-on shoes. Sturdy because you could step on a used insulin needle nobody knows is there. Slip-on because when you arrive at an interview and see shoes on the floor by the front door, it could be a cultural sensitivity pass/fail test. Or just because the homeowner knows that scientists have confirmed that our shoes are the #1 pathway bacteria use to enter our homes.

Always call people by their names. Psych 101 says that's important to us all. Yes, but never do that until you are absolutely *positive* you've got the right name. It *can* be too late to make a good first impression.

Smile. In business, it pays to smile. Yes, but if you smile when a client knows he has just said something stupid, you will never be forgiven.

Forget "Better late than never" for an interview. That's never true. Be early, double check the address, park nearby, relax awhile then pull up at exactly the right time.

Avoid discussing politics or religion. Don't even hint about either one with a client. Not even with the dogs who listen to your every word - it may all be on a voice-activated tape recorder. Yes, but the new comics in your life are to be the exception. One of my first interviews was with a minister who was thrilled to have moved into his new house. When I congratulated him, he said, "It was as close as I could get to Heaven without having the streets paved with gold." He laughed infectiously and told me a joke he has to avoid telling during a sermon. "A rich man was at the Pearly Gates arguing with Saint Peter. He had possessions he wanted to bring along and Saint Peter was saying, 'Absolutely Not!' The rich man demanded, 'Let me talk to God.' To make a long story short, God agreed, "Yes, but you are limited to one suitcase, no more." He thought and thought and finally decided to fill the suitcase with solid gold. When Saint Peter said, 'Welcome to Heaven... but I'll have to check your baggage,' he looked in the suitcase and stared at the man, and said, 'Pavement? You brought Pavement?'"

Buddha said, "Look for sand in your rice. Look for rice in your sand." I once read those words to a most remarkable dog, who put his head on my lap, looked at me as if to say, "I'm the rice." I said, "Yes, it's true. And everybody here knows it. You are that rare, that special."

Welcome, my dear,

Aunt Suzi

September, 2016

Dear Jennifer,

I so enjoy thinking about your questions. "Are there any hard and fast rules for success in pet sitting?" I can think of a few:

The Maya Angelou Rule: "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time." Pet Sitter version – When a dog bites you the first time, get the hell out.

Always behave as if you are on camera. You would be at my house, if I had pets, which I don't - except for Charlotte, my spider. But hold that thought.

IRS Rule – "It is better to travel than to arrive." Because mileage is tax deductible. (I made that up; it's from *The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.)

American Indian proverb: Don't judge any man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins. (That way, if he gets mad at you, you're a mile away and he's barefoot.)

The Rachel Maddow (Host, MSNBC TV News, 9 PM.) Rule: "Don't get overextended. If you burn the candle at both ends, pretty soon you're just going to be wick."

Feed your ego, or feed your family.

Stay focused: You'll hit fewer cars, lose fewer keys, and step on fewer tails.

Take time to smell the roses... and read the books. The doors to some astonishing libraries will be open to you.

Do the important stuff first. Luckily, Marie Dressler said, "Only a few things are really important."

There is one secret to success, and it is perseverance. But do the important stuff first.

Cher's Rule – "Give yourself some slack." Seriously, obey this one. Remember that:

The French writer Voltaire drank 70 cups of coffee a day.

Frank Sinatra took a shower 12 times a day.

Mozart kept a fart diary.

You will know you are a success when even your silence is golden: the great mime Marcel Marceau's biggest selling album included 40 minutes of complete silence, followed by thunderous applause.

George Carlin Rule – If you are not enjoying your life, you're missing the point.

Lovingly,

Aunt Suzi

October, 2016

Dear Jennifer,

I don't want to alarm you but there is something you should know about.

I was taking care of a dog I dearly love, named Bear, who looks like a long-haired version of the sweet-faced white baby seals that killers hunt for money. Bear is a rescue dog who is so terrified of abandonment that he is nearly suicidal when left alone. It was a 24 hour a day job. Bear was on the back deck watching for squirrels; I was in the basement when a cap came off a tooth. I got an emergency appointment with the dentist, which I hate. I thought to myself, "Damn, I have to go to the dentist, and I have to go *now*, and I have to take Bear." Within *seconds* he was in front of me, a white whirling dervish, huge eyes filled with pure joy, yelling "Yes!" in full-throated dog.

I sat down stunned, like what I think a bolt of lightning must feel like on the inside. Almost speechless - "What the...?" Unable to believe my eyes. Unable to think the unthinkable.

Later when I told his mother about it, she said calmly, "Oh, I believe it. Happens to me all the time. Bear can read my mind, always has."

I went to the library, my safe house, and told my favorite librarian what I wanted and why. She said, "I have two dogs like that. I can be doing the laundry and think to myself, 'I guess I have time to take the dogs to the dog park.' And immediately they'll be all over me, jumping up and down, barking. I don't know what it is, but it happens."

Paul Darcy Boles wrote, "A library is as important as good bread."

In Dr. Rupert Sheldrake's amazing book, *Dogs that Know When their Owners are Coming Home*, he described experiments in which dogs were video-taped full time, also their owners who went away from home, in one case out to dinner. On split-screen videos, time-synchronized, independently verified, it was clear when the dogs became excited; their reactions began at the moment the owners *decided to come home*.

Sheldrake believes it to be a telepathic ability some animals have and it depends on a strong bond between a pet and a person. He cites a large survey of pet owners, 65 million of whom state that they have or had a telepathic connection with a pet. He says it is normal, rather than paranormal (beyond normal.) Just like the known senses, telepathic communication must have been subject to natural selection and since it had considerable survival value, telepathy evolved naturally. Unlike most people, some dogs never lost that ability.

Bear and his military family have moved to North Carolina. I wonder if he knows when I am missing him.

So what the hell happened to people? Being human, with all our baggage - literacy, civilization, mechanistic attitudes, and dependence on technology? Sheldrake thinks so, "and our ancestors may have made up for deficiencies in their own sensitivity by relying on that of the animals around them."

Many writers think that what dogs really want is the company of other dogs. (Cats, they say, want mice.) Dogs want to belong, they want each other. And a valued, respected position in a safe, orderly home. And a place to play and eat and rest together. And especially to sleep - perhaps to dream of meat and potatoes. That we adore them is, well, gravy. That they return the emotion is often what matters to us most.

It is very important to them that we love them. We have the keys that open the door to the whole world. Even locked lovingly in a mansion, they know that the freedom to explore life itself, which we take for granted, is ours alone to give. We arrive home as liberators. "Let's go out" must sound like a pardon to the innocent. Like us they seek fun, adventure. And to read the latest (pee)news and (poo)books, and the highest pleasure of all, to work hard at work worth doing.

Like them, each of us has a "Task," as Robert Fulghum puts it, "to locate yourself in the total scheme of things." When a dog does that, the result is Peace. The reward, a peaceful night's sleep, and when there is nothing that needs doing, perhaps a nap, and then rest afterwards.

I wish I spoke dog; I could use some advice.

For us, it gets complicated. When I go to bed, the earth is spinning me (us) at over 600 miles an hour at southern Maryland's latitude. The earth is racing around the sun. The sun is whirling around our galaxy (the Milky Way), which is throwing itself about in intergalactic space. All at an estimated 2 million mph. *And*, since the universe is expanding at about 3.7 million miles an hour, when we wake up in the morning we'll all be 30 million more miles away from here!!

I know, freaks me out too. Try not to think about it.

Reminds me of a night last September, sleeping on a deck with two border collies, Padfoot and Buckbeak, named for Harry Potter characters. They were exhausted after having dug their way out of the backyard fence and traveling over a mile, where I found them trying to herd goats, which could easily have killed them.

I was still too upset to sleep, so I enjoyed the bright starry night, and for the first time, identified Andromeda (M31), the galaxy closest to ours, rising in the east. I woke the dogs up to show them, "Look! That light has traveled more than two million light years to get here to your eyes! A light year is 6 trillion miles! So that galaxy is 15 million trillion miles away and you can see it!" They didn't look, of course, but they sensed my excitement. They agreed that, in the total scheme of things, it called for a Two Milkbone Celebration. I even tasted one. Not bad. Needs salt.

Goodnight dear,

Aunt Suzi

November, 2016

Dear Jennifer,

I wish you were here. Today it's all cats all the time. I start with one special cat because I'm the boss and I can do what I want to, mostly. Winter is the loveliest, most graceful, gentle cat I've ever known – all white, long-haired, she is the matriarch of a three-cat family.

Her carriage is so elegant that I find myself standing up straighter.

She walks like water flows; I've tried to do that but I can't.

She is so immaculate I have the urge to brush my teeth when they don't need it.

Her welcome is addictive – blinking at me softly in a code I feel rather than understand.

Her head-bumping "Hello!" could fell me if I were a tree.

A friend gave me some magazines with lots of perfume strips in them and I brought them to her. Turns out, Winter loves gardenias.

I pick her up. She smells my new perfume, and blinks "You love me." I blink back.

Her head falls on my shoulder.

Winter's housemates do not get along. The tuxedo cat, Fred (Astaire), doesn't like anybody. "I could see that, if not actually disgruntled, he was far from being grunted." Whoever wrote that knows Fred. He is especially mean to the newcomer in the house - a small, young cat who was found half-drowned on a beach, apparently lost overboard from a passing sailboat. He is very quiet and reserved. His parents think he may not yet understand what has happened to him or where he is. His name, subject to change if he decides to stay here, is Fishbait.

A kitten wrote a poem, according to Francesco Marciuliano, which I think describes the situation here:

There Is an Older Cat

. . . . .

There is an older cat  
Who does not want me here  
There is an older cat  
Who hisses when I approach  
There is an older cat  
Who eats my food  
There is an older cat  
Who steals my toys  
Who pushes me off chairs  
Who bats me on the head  
Who bites me on the neck  
There is an older cat  
Who does not know  
Just how big my breed gets  
But there is an older cat  
Who in six month's time  
Is going to learn that 24/7

I am a sucker for intentionally funny animals. Tonight I will be staying with some cats with such wry deadpan humor that I should not be writing this, I should be filming them. When I first met the *ten* of them, I thought that they were not especially beautiful or graceful or interesting looking cats but their widely-traveled parents told me that each one had been carefully selected. (I thought, silently, "For what?") They said they were happily awaiting the arrival of another one. ("And...Why?") I did admire the elaborate ceiling-high carpet trees built in several places throughout the house. (Though not, I noticed, in their bedroom.)

On some unknown cue at night an unseen curtain seems to go up and an act begins. Two cats at a time begin to chase one another; the goal is apparently to silently shatter any semblance of peace in a room, break some personal best record, survive to joke about it and exit at warp speed. As if the fittest gets a Darwin Award. And the last laugh.

They fly into my room and pounce on my bed like it's a launch pad on their way to the moon. Even at escape velocity, mid-air collisions are rare. Only once did I ever consider cancelling my season ticket – when one of them crashed into my solar plexus; I couldn't breathe right for a week.

My startle reflex is now an endless source of amusement. I can just hear them offstage:

"I win! I bet she jumped three feet that time!"

"Did you see her sandwich go flying?"

"Bet she was writing about us and forgot what she was saying."

"She's locked herself in the bathroom again!"

"Better let her calm down. Dinner is in a half an hour."

I am a well-paid audience of one with the best seat in the house in a private theater full of flying comics. "There is only one thing about which I am certain," W. Somerset Maugham wrote, "and this is that there is very little about which one can be certain." I am certain that they are without malice.

And that usually no harm will probably come to me most of the time.

Fortunately the troop sleeps soundly through the night, with the exception of a gold tabby named Pi, who often slips silently under my quilt and crawls slowly, zigzagging toward me. It takes a long time. Apparently, surprise itself is the covert mission. Suddenly he pops up in my face and head-bumps me between the eyes. I don't know how to describe that gentle BAM! He curls around my neck, taps a slow tune with his tail, and rests a sweet, soft paw on my cheek.

I wish you were here,

Aunt Suzi

December, 2016

#### Author's Note

Writing an important letter to someone you love is very difficult. Each word matters too much. Mark Twain said, "The right word is really a large matter – it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."

From her last letter, Jennifer is off to a good start in her new business and is now at a Stop and Ponder point - about becoming a full-time pet sitter. Sounds like a milestone called the "Hudson Bay Start." Meaning it's not too late for her to go back to her 9 to 5. Either that or kiss most of her free week ends goodbye. I hope she hangs on like a kitten in a tree.

Robert Fulghum described the Hudson Bay Start in *Uh – Oh: some Observations From Both Sides of the Refrigerator*.

"In the glory days of fur trading in North America during the eighteenth century, the Hudson Bay company was known both for its willingness to take adventurous risks and its careful preparation for those risks. Trading journeys were habitually begun with vigorous enthusiasm, yet the frontiersmen always camped the first night a few short miles from the company headquarters. This allowed the gear and supplies to be sorted and considered, so that if anything had been left behind in the haste to be underway, it was easy to return to the post to fetch it."

From a fur-trapper's diary: "Fourteen hours on snowshoes and I wish I had pie." What a great line.

*Psychology Today* printed the results of a survey asking, basically, "Is there an aroma that really turns you on?" The runaway favorite was Hot Cinnamon Buns!

From Francesco Marciuliano's book of poems "written by kittens," *I Could Pee on This*:

#### I Miss Me

I miss my special sunny place  
I miss my head pressed against your face  
I miss the carpet rub against my paws  
I miss the sofa tug against my claws  
I miss skidding across the kitchen floor  
I miss yowling at your bedroom door  
I miss lying on my windowsill  
I miss refusing to take my pill  
I miss my family, my home, your sweater  
I even miss that worthless Irish Setter  
I miss everything that was me  
Before I climbed this stupid tree

January, 2017

Dear Jennifer,

Thank you for an amazing letter. I enjoyed it very much. I shared it with a friend, also a pet sitter, whose only comment was, "Why didn't I think of that?"

It's no surprise that your pet sitting business is a resounding success. Congratulations! I am happy for you. Mazel tov. That's Yiddish for "Well done. I'm proud of you. Good Luck!"

Are you feeling an unusual "rising sensation?" I may know why. Your great-grandmother Alma was like you. She was honest, smart, kind, always tried to do the right thing, loved animals.

Once she and grandpa invited the entire family to their home in Wisconsin at blueberry-picking time. We all went out, young and old, with the same size bucket. I remember how small that bucket made me feel. When I came in with it filled to overflowing, Grandma gave me a big smile and said, "Well, the cream rises."

Grandma always helped displaced or homeless animals if they were lucky enough to find their way to her home. She would have seen her kindness in you and been very proud. Picture yourself eating a huge slice of grandma's blueberry pie.

Advice that helped me:

- 1.) You need a backup. Two is better. Look for professional pet sitters working in your area that are bonded and insured. Meet these people. (It's not easy.) Work with them. You really do need a backup at times and so do they. Find good people who can cover for you when you can't get out of the mess you got yourself into. Giving and receiving a good, thorough job report over the phone with your professional peers is a skill you must acquire. Actually, it's a lot of fun.
- 2.) The hardest lesson to learn is to Rest when you are Tired. 15 minutes' rest can give you back your "A Game." That's not much time. So sleep fast. Keep a small pillow and a blanket in the car. Do a wakeup call even if you just think you may need one. Lee Child describes it as military training: Sleep when you can because you never know when you're going to sleep again. Because "tiredness causes more foul-ups than carelessness and stupidity put together." As some wit put it: "Sleep faster. We need the pillows."

To answer your question, Flower is doing wonderfully. The sixth and last chemo treatment was finished 2 weeks ago. Labs are good. Sonogram is good. Everything looks great. He is so happy. He and his irrepressible playmate Rosie are celebrating with their family. He'll be two soon. We wish him all the happy years he is fighting so hard for- to spend those years playing with Rosie.

If you can, donate to <https://www.gofundme.com/flowers-fund-coton-de-tulear>. For pictures of Flower and Rosie, visit [suzithepetsitter.com](http://suzithepetsitter.com)

My love to you,

Aunt Suzi

February, 2017

Dear Jennifer,

Yes, let's do it. I loved your story about the snakes. And I accept your charming proposal to share our stories with one another. Sounds like fun. "Share What You Know." Annie Dillard said it best: "Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes."

My snake sitting job was, like yours, a classic "bait and switch" con. It began when I fell in love with six bulldog puppies. The moment I did, the question was, "Oh, by the way, would you be willing to look in on our snakes for us?" (To myself I said, "For those puppies...") To her I said, "No problem."

I didn't feel faint until I saw their room full of breathtakingly beautiful pythons, each in a brilliantly lit case, each wrapped around a tree bough. In a most considerate tone, she said "there really isn't anything to do. Just check that they have water. You could spray some water on the mulch if it looks dry. Just, you know, make sure they're all there." It was probably a psychotic break.

The following Monday I found myself taking care of the six adorable puppies. I heard reality fracture when I walked into the snake room and one of them said, "George, stop frowning. You'll scare away the new pet sitter. And I'm out of water. Smile, George."

"I can't. I lost my smile a long time ago. As Aristotle said about infinity, my smile 'is both necessary and impossible.'"

"Hey, you two! Enough philosophy! The pet sitter is shaking. She'll spill my water. My mulch is wet from the last one. Everybody quiet down... hey, what if she's crazy enough to hear us?"

"The odds are eight-to-five you never come back."

"You people have no manners. You 'ooh & aah' over Max all the time and compare him to me, right in front of me, like I'm deaf, like I have no feelings. I wish Max would sell already. But whose gonna pay eighteen grand for a python?"

Too soon the puppies and the pythons were gone. Their people eventually moved too. Once I saw Max in a movie. He was on display with eerie lighting and sinister music, wrapped around a tree limb. He looked absolutely, jaw-dropping gorgeous. I was happy to see him. But an elegant prison is still a prison. So I was sad too. Max was definitely not smiling.

Please write soon. I want more.

I Love You,

Aunt Suzi

March, 2017

Dear Jennifer,

Please do not tell me another snake story.

If that was your "guardian angel" she was less than diligent. She should have said, "Good Luck. Don't Die." Your only mistake was accepting that job in the first place. So, you weren't hurt, but you could have been.

I know we agreed to share our stories. But that creeped me out, so this may not appeal:

I had an interview with a man who had a huge Doberman named Rocky who was lying very still on the sofa and had a large white bandage wrapped around his right front leg. His dad explained:

"A snake got in and bit him."

Me: "...in..."

Dad: "But you don't have to worry. I found the snake and killed it."

Me: "...it..."

Dad: "And I found the hole and I plugged that. We're good now, but it was poisonous and Rocky doesn't have long."

Picture a black dog on a black sofa, if you can, with fearful, questioning eyes.

I felt the hairs rising on the back of my neck. I wanted to stay and fight that man with my bare hands. I wanted to deck him over and over again. I hated his thoughtless, reckless, stupid face. He was so lucky my feet backed me out of that house.

I'm sorry to say that I only *wanted* to scream, "You Idiot! How do you know there was only one snake? And only one hole?" My exit was so graceless, I'm embarrassed to remember it.

That night, still too upset to sleep, I reread May Sarton because she so often helps me. She wrote about a letter she got from a friend who said, "I believe that diligence is important but it is grace that matters most."

Years ago, when I quoted that line to an oncology nurse friend, she laughed at me and said, "Grace doesn't work here anymore."

I'm so grateful that we are both surrounded by good books and funny friends and happy animals.

And by people who love us.

Aunt Suzi

April, 2017

Dear Jennifer,

Your "Pet Sitter's Gratitude List" was delightful. Thank you. Yes, I would be honored to share mine with you:

Personally, I'm most grateful that my dear son is happy and healthy. (He's in Hawaii. He doesn't write and he doesn't call.)

Professionally, my closest dog friend, Flower Jackson, finished chemo in January and all the monthly tests are still normal. I am so happy for him and his family. He is almost two and may get to have his whole life after all. He is learning to salsa (in my lap) which is fun. "Suzi, you lost the beat." Rosie prefers the mambo. Me too.

For the latest news about him, visit the website <https://www.gofundme.com/flowers-fund-coton-de-tulear>

My pet sitting career has passed a milestone: I love what I do and I now have to turn down more jobs than I can accept because my dance card is full - a dream come true.

I'm so glad to have found a fun way to write when I need to. Also a way to be published - on my own website - which is now solely the work of a genie with magic fingers who calls herself Peter Pan. She reminds me of anthropologist Margaret Mead's "I was wise enough to never grow up while fooling most people into believing I had." I was stunned to watch "suzi dog" pull up the website instantly.

I'm happy that finally *Child's Return*, my houseboat, is as renovated as she will ever be. (She says, "Me too.") So a major shocking expense is over. Have repaired and replaced, shined and polished every inch. I'm very proud of her: *Log of the Child's Return*, [www.suzithepetsitter.com](http://www.suzithepetsitter.com)

I'm grateful for the solitude, which I need to write, so I'm content with our quiet berth in this small live-aboard-friendly marina. I am surrounded by beautiful boats and people who love them. Compared to my life at sea level, living on land is boring. But, though I was sick about it, I didn't hesitate to abandon ship before two killer hurricanes hit. During Isabelle I had six mooring lines out. One last line held. I cried when I saw it.

I've become a one issue voter. I rejoice loudly as I find more and more groups fighting the causes of global warming. My worst fear is that we are close to the tipping point, where there is no turning back. All because the greedy billionaires who profit from burning fossil fuels will have the answer their favorite question: "Who was earth's richest man?"

I've often read that we should "save the money" we spend on space exploration. If there are extraterrestrial civilizations, they could easily be way more advanced than we are. They could be watching us in horror, wanting nothing to do with us, seeing us humans turn earth into a dangerous rogue planet. One astronomer said, "If so, their firewalls would have firewalls."

I used to laugh at Lily Tomlin's "Remember we're all in this alone." (It's not funny anymore.)

I no longer want to live forever; I couldn't bear to watch it happen. Which reminds me, Lola, if you're listening, I take back my offer. Remember when you were at the hospital and I was your nurse and I asked you, "If I could give you a pill that would keep you alive forever, would you take it?" And later you said, "Nurse, about that pill. I'll take one if you will?" Lola, we need to talk.

I am grieving the death of stand-up comic Mitch Hedberg. I love his always-kind jokes: "My fake plants died because I did not pretend to water them." It's hard to get me to really laugh about death, thinking about it often now in my seventies. My book friends are not as fun:

Helen Keller wrote, "Death is no more than passing from one room into another. But there's a difference for me, you know. Because in that other room I shall be able to see." (I want that for her, more than I can say. I want her writing about it. I want Mitch telling me jokes.)

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross: "People after death become complete again."

Bob Dylan said, "I'm just glad to be feeling better. I really thought I'd be seeing Elvis soon."

J.K. Rowling, who doesn't believe in magic, wrote, "Anything's possible if you've got enough nerve." She believes death is "just life's next adventure."

I'm in the Margaret Mead school of thought: "We have nowhere else to go. This is all we have." I just hope I don't get dragged out of here kicking and screaming. If I do, I'll be channeling Richard Pryor yelling "Help!" in the great movie *Stir Crazy*. (I can't think of a funnier way to go.)

I'd like to die writing - as Robert B. Parker did - preferably writing this book-in-progress. I'm trying to get my own obituary written before I need it.

Decision made: The epitaph on my tombstone will read, "Wake me up if there's disco."

More later, I hope,

Aunt Suzi

May, 2017

Dear Jennifer,

What a surprise and such great timing! Thank you. You always were the funny one in the family. But these jokes are really very courageous, and quirky. A copy is going into a bottle, which I'm sending to Florida with a friend, who will toss it into the sea.

Jennifer, I didn't think anyone could make me laugh again that hard and that often. I wish I had such talent. Your art makes people laugh *and change*.

*I know it's hard.* Writing anything is work; comedy must be especially difficult. Do it anyway. Our laughing at such quirky humor is like imagining another galaxy's idea of fun. Surely there is some kind of law that "If you *can* do it, you must do it." Because laughter helps people change. Also because we really do want to believe that, as J.K.Rowling put it, "Anything is possible if you have enough nerve." (*Harry Potter*)

I love to read what funny people write about writing:

Carol Burnett: "I think the hardest thing to do in the world, show-business-wise, is to write comedy."

Lucille Ball: "I'm not funny. What I am is brave."

Chelsea Handler: "I didn't become a comedian to work this hard."

Ernest Hemingway said, "I rewrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied." (That is hard to believe.) "When I have an idea," he wrote, "I turn down the flame, as if it were a little alcohol stove, as low as it will go. Then it explodes and that is my idea."

He sounds like you. I'm envious; writing for me is more like a slow-dripping, wide-open faucet that I can hear just over my shoulder, which can flood my houseboat without warning. All I am is ready. I use up a lot of pens this way, as you can imagine.

Your twists of logic may be what Groucho Marx meant by, "Humor is reason gone mad." Your cadence is like Mitch Hedberg's, which is my highest compliment. My favorite of his is "I bought a seven-dollar pen because I always lose pens and I got sick of not caring."

I have a new hobby too - pet photography. A friend said, "Now, Suzi, I don't want you to take offense, but you absolutely have to get a *new* phone." I was dragged into the 21<sup>st</sup> century where I bought an iPhone6. I am continually stunned by it. Journalist Nancy Gibbs: "A typical smart phone has more computing power than Apollo 11 had when it landed a man on the moon."

I'm posting pictures of my animal friends on the website: [www.suzithepetsitter.com](http://www.suzithepetsitter.com). Also photos of the interesting things I see while walking with dogs. I invite you and other pet sitters to send pictures of the things you enjoy as you walk with yours. I will share the fun. [suzi aboard2005@yahoo.com](mailto:suzi aboard2005@yahoo.com)

Your brave humor is especially comforting to me right now. I am still grieving the loss of Mitch Hedberg, my favorite standup comic. I think he would have applauded your kind one-liners. I certainly do.

Thank You,

Aunt Suzi

P.S.

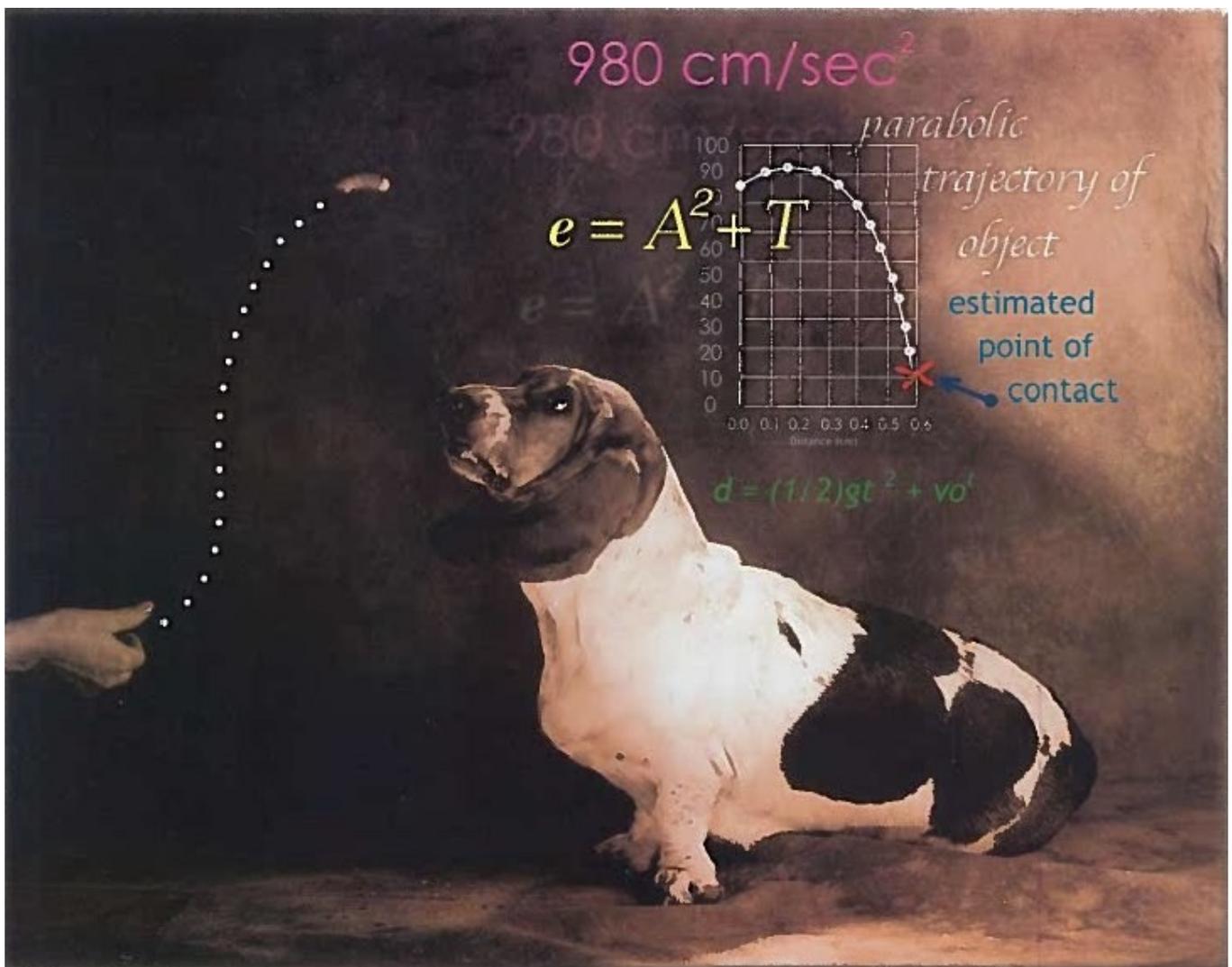
I am more than grateful. Years ago I began keeping a pocket-sized journal of jokes that really make me laugh. Groucho Marx inspired the first notebook with:

"Well, Art is Art, isn't it? Still on the other hand, water is water. And east is east and west is west and if you take cranberries and stew them like applesauce they taste much more like prunes than rhubarb does. Now you tell me what you know."

Your jokes are in the book. I can imagine Groucho laughing.

P.S.S.

This photograph is from *Maggie's Way: Observations from Below Your Knees* by Bill Stanton, father of an irresistible Basset Hound named Maggie. It's titled "Calculations on an approaching Cheez Doodle."



June, 2017

Dear Jennifer,

I have exciting news. These letters are going to be recorded for the website by Dawn H. She is brilliant, articulate, and has just retired. She will read it "probably from poolside in Florida." The audio version of our correspondence will be on [www.suzithepetsitter.com](http://www.suzithepetsitter.com).

If someone had read me to sleep when I was little, when I needed to be filled with hope and confidence, she could have done it then, tucked me in with words. I'm still needy, and she has accepted the challenge: "I'd be thrilled and honored to read it." (My feet can't touch the ground.)

Albert Camus said that any authentic creation is a gift to the future. Dawn H.'s kind, friendly voice will be there for you and for me. As she says simply, "You're welcome."

That was a wonderful story. Yes, I will: "The most interesting animal I've met" was a dog named Murphy. He was a miniature poodle, an adult male, champagne-colored, twenty pounds, with high energy and a sweet disposition. His mom introduced me smiling broadly, "Murphy, this is Suzi."

After our interview, I asked her, "Is he as smart as I think he is?" That smile again, "Smarter."

After our interview, with Murphy listening on the sofa between us, she said, "Murphy, go say goodbye to Suzi." He hopped down, came over to me, put his front paws up on my knees, and offered me a kiss. I'm lucky I didn't fall out of the chair.

Most intelligent dogs understand about 400 words. Murphy's vocabulary was scary, and fascinating. I can't imagine how frustrating we humans must be for dogs. We understand so little, and don't even try.

When I would pretend to ask for his sage advice, his look was all attitude, like "if you don't know by now..." or, as Lily Tomlin put it more accurately, "If you've come here for my help, you're in worse trouble than I thought."

Murphy had parents who rescue four small dogs at a time, and live joyously with them in a house near the Chesapeake Bay. They marvel at Murphy as they take care of them all. She said, "He reminds me of Jerry Seinfeld's jokes about walking his dog. Jerry said 'You know how you can be walking your dog and he stops, and looks at you, and looks back down? He's saying, "There's a quarter.'"

Murphy was always the alpha dog whose food and water nobody else touched. Even when a NASCAR pileup was inevitable, nobody ever ran into him. Everybody always knew where Murphy was.

He was the only one who wanted to walk in the rain. He couldn't care less about drizzle, but those raindrops were "calling my name." I complained, "Why, Murphy? What's so freaking interesting about freaking raindrops?" He never answered, of course, but was always excited and pleased and listened closely to something that I cannot imagine. Whatever it was, the news was good.

He wanted most of all to walk in the nearby woods, a grove of tall old oak trees. He reveled in any windy day, but he especially loved to walk in the woods when the wind was high. He walked as if it were sacred ground. I missed my chance to ask him about it, but I can imagine:

Me: "Murphy, what's with the trees?"

Murphy: "You're not listening, Grasshopper. Your nose is worthless but not your ears."

He had a long, healthy, happy life. But when his favorite playmate Sophie died, and then soon the others, he couldn't accept it and he could not be consoled. And one-by-one, their replacements died. When his entire extended pack disappeared, he couldn't understand or even accept comforting.

Knowing Murphy, he tried his best to make some sense of it. He looked like he had tried hard and failed. I wish I spoke Dog. I'd love to know how far he got.

He was buried in his favorite spot, a bed of spring-blooming narcissus, beside Sophie.

I need a hug,

Aunt Suzi

July, 2017

Dear Jennifer,

Yes, I like your questions: What have you done? What did you learn?

I have blossomed as a flower photographer; I learned that dogs know when you're down.

I have photographed thousands of flowers this spring; it's like being in a deeply satisfying, private, silent, fragrant group hug. I am surrounded by such beautiful colors and shapes and perfumes that I can imagine the dogs saying, "And she's getting paid for this?"

Movie reviewer Roger Ebert: "Your intellect may be confused but your emotions will never lie to you." It feels like I am flowering back and I'm already in love with gardenias. Once I actually thought I heard, "My dear, what took you so long?" I know I saw a wink.

Rashmunisenander Levy explained: "Deep inside you are ten thousand flowers. Each flower blossoms ten thousand times. Each blossom has ten thousand petals. You might want to see a specialist."

I need comedy when I'm scared. I need someone around me who loves me. And I need a lot of hugs. I especially want furry, joyous, noisy, tail-whipping, "Now the Fun Begins" hugs.

I love foot-hugs from happy dogs lying on my feet. It's as if they understand sadness, their generous hearts beating hope and confidence back into me. I almost bought a Dog Lover's Pendant for the Edith Wharton quote, "My little dog-a heartbeat at my feet."

Cats are different. I put up with a shiny black cat named Boo. He likes to hiss and pretend to bite at me when I serve his food. Then hours later he hops up on my bed and head-bumps my chin left and right, looking for an opening for his famous knockout upper cut. When I acknowledge that he has my undivided attention, he snuggles close, tucks his head under my ear, wraps an arm around my neck and holds me. He has probably never been afraid a day in his life, and wouldn't care about sadness even if it were explained well in perfectly good Cat. It is only I who am shocked to find that a little paw playing with my hair can bring me to tears.

Eleanor Roosevelt: "We are afraid to care too much, for fear that the other person does not care at all."

Your letters help me, Jennifer.

Thank you,

Aunt Suzi

August, 2017

Hi Jennifer,

This is Petra Pan, your aunt's webmaster. I don't know if you're aware, but Suzi's email was hacked and she spent two days trying to clean up the mess. She's a bit distraught over the whole thing so I agreed to do this month's letter and talk about some ways to be safe in cyberspace. In real life I've been doing computer science and web development for almost 20 years so I know a bit about cybersecurity.

What many people either don't know or tend to forget is that cyber space is a wild, lawless, dangerous place. No one is safe from attack, as Suzi learned the hard way. I've had my PayPal account hacked by keystroke logging.<sup>1</sup> One of my family members with a cybersecurity degree had his email account deleted by a hacker somewhere in or near Russia. Another family member with a computer science degree had his Amazon account hacked and the hacker put a new credit card on the account. We were joking with him that he should charge a lot of stuff to that credit card and have it sent to his house!

I'm almost paranoid about online privacy. I know that anything I put on the Internet remains there forever and can be easily discovered with a minimum of effort. For example, I won't post a picture to Suzi's website unless we have the owner's permission and, when necessary, I always obscure or crop photos—such as blurring the license plate of a car or a house number, or removing the people in a picture—so it is harder for someone to identify where a picture was taken.

A while ago Suzi wanted to put a friend's full name on her website. In about 10 minutes, using easily accessible tools, I was able to find the friend's phone number, address, age, ethnicity, average income, marital status, and family members. Another 10 minutes on a social network site gave me pictures of her and her husband, pictures of their house, and a really cute picture of their dog. When I showed Suzi what I'd found we agreed to put just the friend's first name on the site!

While the only way to be completely safe is to pull the plug on your computer and turn off your smartphone, there are some things you can do to make yourself less of a target in cyberspace.

First and foremost, make sure you have security software on your computer, laptop, tablet, mobile phone or anything else connected to the Internet. There are some recommendations in the article [The Best Security Suites of 2017](#). Also, you should occasionally check your security settings and you should be sure your security software is always up to date.

Keep your logins and passwords safe—and don't store them on your computer! Use strong passwords with a mixture of letters, numbers, and upper and lower case characters; don't use something obvious like "password" or your pet's name; don't use the same password for more than one account or website; and change your passwords regularly. Check out [Password Protection: How to Create Strong Passwords](#) for more tips.

Back up your data regularly—either to an external hard drive or to an online service (see [The Best Online Backup Services of 2017](#) for some suggestions.) That way you won't lose your data if your computer gets hacked and you have to reload all your pictures, documents, and videos. But do make sure you know the origin of whatever you plug in to your computer. Malware can be spread through infected flash drives, external hard drives, and even smartphones.

As much as possible, avoid putting personal details online such as your home address, telephone numbers, work address, credit card numbers, or your mother's maiden name. If you must include

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<sup>1</sup> A hacker put covert software on my computer that recorded every key I hit on the keyboard and transmitted the information back to them. When I logged into PayPal the hacker was able to capture my login and password. I discovered the intrusion when I checked my credit card statement and found a charge that was made while I was going 65 miles an hour down the highway. To make sure the keylogging software was neutralized I completely wiped my computer and installed a new, clean operating system. I then changed the logins and passwords on every bank account, credit card, or store account I could find.

personal information—such as when you're doing online shopping—use known, reputable retailers or websites, and make sure you're on a trusted, secure website. Most security software will tell you whether a site is safe or might be suspicious. And any time you're entering information into a form look for the padlock sign in your browser's address bar. Here's the padlock for three common browsers:

Internet Explorer  Google Chrome  Secure Mozilla Firefox 

Also look for “https” instead of just “http” at the beginning of the URL.

https://this\_site\_is\_safe.com

**NOT**

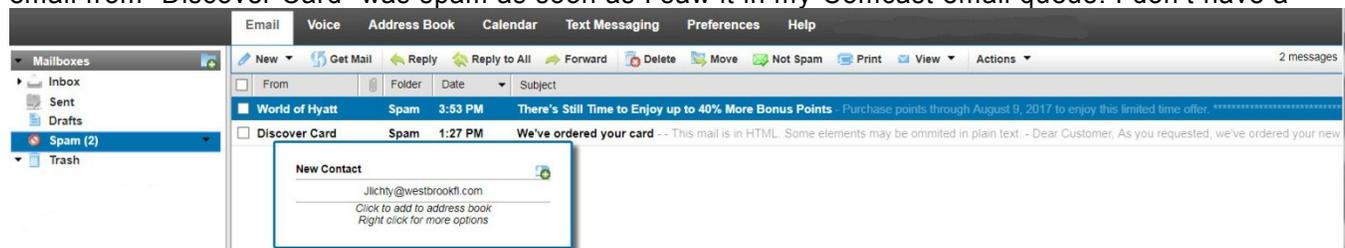
http://this\_site\_is\_not\_safe.com

The “s” stands for “secure” and it means your information is encrypted in transit.

Try to avoid sites with pornography, gambling, free software or downloads, or sensational or provocative content. These sites are notorious for being filled with dangerous malware like pop-up ads and security threats. Be aware too that even legitimate sites can become compromised.

Be careful clicking on links on a website, in an Instant Message, on a social network site, in an email, or on your smartphone. Double check the URL of the website a link takes you to; bad actors will often take advantage of spelling mistakes to direct you to a harmful domain (e.g., paypal.com instead of paypal.com). And don't click on pop-up windows or ads.

Emails are one of the most common ways for your computer or device to be infected. I suspected the email from “Discover Card” was spam as soon as I saw it in my Comcast email queue. I don't have a



Discover Card and the text that was visible in my preview was addressed to “Dear Customer” instead of to me by name. Once I rolled over the sender's name I was certain that the email was malicious because Discover is not going to use Jlichty@westbrookfl.com's email account to send me an email. I moved the email immediately to my Spam folder where Comcast will take note of the sender and delete the message. If you don't use Comcast's email tool then you should learn how to preview an email and find out the sender without opening the email in your tool.

As Suzi now well knows, a criminal can hack into your friend's email (or social network) account then use their address book to send emails or post messages to you claiming they are in trouble and asking you to transfer them money. To protect yourself from a malicious email attack, never, ever:

- open a message or email that comes from someone you don't know that appears to be spam,
- open an email attachment unless you expect it, you're positive you know what it is, and you trust the sender, or
- click on a link in an email message unless you're positive you know where it's going, and you trust the sender.

Finally, trust your feelings. Don't believe it if something sounds suspicious or an offer seems unrealistic. Your family member is not likely to send you an email saying they need \$3000, nor is the Nigerian banking scheme likely to lead to anything other than you losing a lot of money.

Social networking can be fun, informative, and a great way to keep up with friends and family. However, everything you have ever done on a social network site is kept forever—even the things you thought you'd “deleted”—including who or what you poked or liked, anything you've posted or shared, what events you have or have not attended, and when and where you have logged into your account. And all this information is shared with data harvesters and other businesses—the price you pay for a “free” service.

Since social networking is forever there are some precautions you can take to help to make you safer:

- Check your security and privacy settings to control who sees your information.
- Again, be cautious about the personal information you post. Remember how I was able to find all that information about Suzi's friend?
- Avoid providing too much personal information even to friends. Do they really need to know your birthdate? And remember, while you may have strong privacy settings, you have no control over what your friends might repost. Why make things easy for identity thieves?
- Never say where you are or where you're going to be. If a criminal sees a picture of you in Spain or at the Taj Mahal, or that you're going to be at Joe's Bar at 7PM on Wednesday, or that you're going to be visiting Suzi at Christmas then they know your home is unprotected and ripe for a break in. If you must post the picture at least wait until you get back to tell everyone what a great time you had.

Finally, your smartphone can also pose privacy and security problems. Forget government intrusion; you're more likely to be tracked by your service provider, an app creator, or someone with a scanner. Did you know that whenever your smartphone is on your service provider knows exactly where you are, who you call, how long you talk, and all the places you've visited? If you want to be anonymous, either turn your smartphone off when you don't need to make a call or get a prepaid phone and change it out regularly. If you do decide to keep your smartphone then always protect your device, be sure your phone is pin-protected so all your personal information stored on it is safe, and make sure to download a security app which allows you to remotely wipe any personal data should your smartphone be lost or stolen.

Anyway, I hope these tips are valuable and that you stay safe in cyberspace. Suzi will be back next month.

Best wishes,

Petra

September, 2017

"A horse with a bridle and no saddle" was what the doctors recommended for therapy for my legs. After the car wreck and surgeries and casts, I was a discouraged, scared, skinny twelve year old girl unaware of how afraid I was of heights.

The therapist was Sycamore, a magnificent pinto. He had bold patches of white, brown, and black and an adorable star on his forehead. The farmer said, "He's getting old but he's still sound. Real good with kids. He's earned his peace and quiet. Been out to pasture awhile. He looks bored." I hoped so, because he was tall and I was terrified. ("What if I fall off and shatter my legs again?") He was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. I was desperate; I'd have to learn how to pretend to be brave. I never fooled mother: "Remember, Suzi, it doesn't take courage to do something you're not afraid to do."

We wandered alone not far from town, following dry Missouri creek beds and trails the Pawnee Indians were said to have used. I found part of a beautiful beaded necklace made of fossils, which captivated daddy.

I wanted to gallop. If I could just hang on through Sycamore's hard trot, which made my leg muscles scream, we could have a wonderful gallop down a tree-lined country road. With my fingers in a death grip in his mane, we started off fast, and stopped. Well, Sycamore stopped; I flew. I was flipped up, head over heels, and found myself hanging helplessly, my fingers tangled in his mane. Sycamore snorted something like, "Use your legs or don't, but no more hanging onto my mane."

We worked; I fell off and my legs didn't shatter. We worked harder; I got better at falling off. My legs slowly got stronger. One day I stopped falling off; I remember it well. It was the day we followed an old trail that ended in a meadow that was filled with wildflowers, bright gold, yellow, red, and orange flowers so vibrant in the morning sun that Sycamore just stood there shaking his nose. I sat there shaking my head.

I was told that horses were mostly color blind, but that day I knew better. After that, whenever I laid the reins across his neck, Sycamore headed straight for the meadow. We took bouquets to mother. She was thrilled to have them on the table. Mother was an elementary school teacher, also an amateur chef/gardener with an insane devotion to flavor. She started giving him her brightest, reddest apples every day. I was so proud of him.

I didn't feel brave. It was more like we were out looking for it - hoping to find it, like going couraging, if you could do it as a verb. What I was feeling was joy.

Once we were walking along and Sycamore stopped and stood still as if waiting for something. I looked around and couldn't see a thing. Suddenly mint-flavored air filled up the space around us and Sycamore watched me melt, slide off to the ground and roll in it. His snort sounded like a chuckle to me. Later mother melted too; she made a special place in her garden for the new mint bed.

Sycamore hauled home a small gift Christmas tree through high ice-crusting snow. It was a wonderful Christmas. The best present was the butter-soft saddle blanket made of bright yellows and reds and oranges and greens, for Sycamore.

Years later I read feminist theorist Mary Daly: "You become courageous by doing courageous acts...It's like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging."

I Love You,

Aunt Suzi

October, 2017

Dear Jennifer,

I did write once, thank you for asking, about that wonderful horse, Sycamore, years later in a college paper for an Anthropology class. A mystery had begun in my head when Sycamore and I rode up that ancient trail on a high limestone bluff overlooking the Missouri river valley, where I found part of a necklace of beads that were actually fossils.

My mother (always the school teacher) studied the necklace while I asked her endless questions. She gave me a look and a book, and said, "You have found something that would have excited Sherlock Holmes." I hated when she did that. But I found the quote in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*: "There is nothing more stimulating than a case where everything goes against you."

I studied the necklace, secretly trying to channel Sherlock Holmes: Make the assumption that you have a mystery, if you like, but remember, facts first, then a theory.

OK, assume that the necklace was not discarded or lost, but was placed there. Who could have put it there? Why there, specifically, not another place? The necklace was simply strung, with no design; the fossils were apparently chosen at random; it could even have been strung in haste - so probably not ornamental.

Then, or therefore, the necklace itself could mean something – maybe it was a sign, a signal, or a message (one of some importance surely or why bother to make it?) If it was indeed meant to be found, then it was left there for another traveler to find on that trail. How would the finder know where to look? Or even know what the message meant when it was found? Who was supposed to find it? Was this a fragment of a larger necklace made for an adult? Or was it for a child and left untied? Does it mean anything? I needed facts.

While earning a B.A. in Anthropology I learned that Pawnee (or Arikara) American Indians had lived where I did centuries later. It was very likely smallpox that killed them, or one of the other virulent deadly diseases against which the people had no immunity. The people here feared the curses of witches, not the traders who brought the diseases during the clash of the Indian-European cultures. Pawnee people died at home and away, together or alone, sick, in pain, and terrified.

A very few people with lucky DNA were naturally immune and able to survive the highly communicable diseases. Sherlock Holmes would say, "'Communicable' is the operative word here. Which explains the necklace."

I had a fun mystery but now my first solid clue broke my heart. The professor said, "Possibly 60 million people lived in North and South America when the Europeans arrived. They lived in settlements far apart, often at war, on both continents. The diseases that decimated the Indians did so in a remarkably short span of time. How the diseases spread so fast is largely still a mystery."

My college term paper assignment was to write about a day in the life of a prehistoric North American, anyone, anywhere, but ethnographically correct.

Ethnology of North Americans Final paper  
By Suzi Schmidt  
Introduction

When I was a child, my legs were badly broken in a car wreck. They healed so slowly that the doctors finally recommended a special physical therapist, a gentle horse to ride, one with a bridle but no saddle; the exercise would help strengthen my legs as I used them to stay on the horse. Sycamore was a very beautiful, tall, aging pinto who carried me without a misstep or a stumble as we explored dry creek beds and old trails, all near our small Missouri town. Following an old path once, which climbed slowly up a densely wooded limestone bluff overlooking the Missouri river valley, I found part of a necklace a few feet from a pleasant resting place with good grass for Sycamore. The necklace was several inches long; the beads were all alike, from tiny to an inch wide,

each one with a perfect hole in the exact center. The beads were fossils, the remains of extinct plantlike marine animals called crinoids (modern Sea Lilies) that lived here, growing like plants anchored in a warm shallow sea. This was during the Paleozoic era of Earth's history, which began about 600 million years ago and ended about 240 million years ago.

We also found a high cut-away bank where a large deposit of crinoids had been exposed. Billions of them had "weathered" out of the limestone, like an opened treasure box. The Pawnee Indians chose these fossils for their jewelry.

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Oh, He-Who-Holds-Up-The-Sky, I thank you for our good lives. And for the strength to stand here in this sacred place so high in the sky and trees and wind, where I can see pride in my ancestors' eyes. The spirit of the Moon is huge and always gives me such comfort. This has been the worst day of my life. My dear husband died in pain, raving about witches. We have lost all of our beautiful children except She-Who-Dances and now she has a fever. It must be witches. So many strong people are dead, but her twins seem to be free from this curse. I had to send them away to save them. I hope I did the right thing. I spoke with them as I made their travel packs, seeing all the unspoken questions in their eyes. I did not hold them and kiss them. I feel a strange heat in me. I told them they must go where they will be safe, and that we will follow soon. I told them to go to the leader of the Mandan.

"Show her my token, and she will welcome you. You will remember her; we see them every year at mulberry time. She and I always exchange gifts each year just as our ancestors did on their annual food-gathering rounds. And we pledge to one another that if disaster strikes our people, we will accept refugees without question. You will find them near the creek, upland, gathering hackberries. Follow the high bluff trail downriver. You know it well, but this time only the dogs will protect you. Your brave father and I will follow you as soon as he returns from the trading trip. He took many fine skins to the white traders again, so you know he'll have more presents for you. He is overdue now, so surely it won't be long.

Walk silently. The trail does not cross any warrior's path but still it is well known. Try always to stay downwind if you hear footsteps coming. Trust no Apache or Comanche; the Pawnee people that they have stolen are their slaves. You have learned a kill strike to use if you are attacked. If you fear for your lives you *must* strike first. Don't let anything stop you. Try to stay together. There is plenty of food in your travel packs, and your quivers are filled with the finest arrows the village has to offer.

These are your instructions. Fill the skin bags that I put in your packs with beads when you pass the cut-away bank where the special beads fall from the rocks. When you have rested each morning or evening, make a necklace just large enough to fit your adorable necks but don't tie the ends together. Before you leave, throw it an arm's toss east of the campfire. Your father and I will find it and know that we follow your trail.

You must go. There will be plenty of time for hugs and kisses later. May your children's children honor you as you have honored me."

They left, crying soundlessly, waved once before they climbed out of sight.

Now, in this sacred place, I am so proud to see my ancestors standing beside me. I feel the heat in me rising. What if I don't make it? What if a future wanderer one day finds a small necklace lying east of an old campsite deep in the woods? Who could believe it means there is death and destruction here?

November, 2017

Dear Jennifer,

Thank you for your letter and the honesty with which you described your current situation. It immediately brought back memories of my own painful experience. Of course I will give you my best advice:

First, give up. Get away from him NOW.

Your self-image, your self-esteem, your whole life is in danger. You can't help him, can't change him, and can't survive him. A malignant narcissist is a predator, a sociopath who always lies to everybody, at every opportunity, about everything, all the time. It is a verbal violence meant to be hurtful, not "because he can't help it" but because he gets to enjoy a feeling of superiority, even for a few pathetic seconds. Like an addiction. Because to a sociopath it is a mood-elevator; lying to people hurts them, degrading others is his fun and he wouldn't dream of stopping. Get out, Jennifer.

He does not need to be told that his lies cause wounds, he counts on it. He intends to cause you pain because he thrives on the high it gives him. Seeing you in pain, watching his lies degrade you and weaken you, watching you "fall for it" is what he likes best. He enjoys looking down on your continually diminished life because it makes him feel bigger somehow, better than stupid you. Translated into sick prison talk: you are weak, therefore "vulnerable with commissary." Meaning he wants anything you have worth money.

He thinks it is power that he feels when he sees your spirit mashed down into the ground under him. I know because I was briefly married to one at nineteen.

It was my first introduction to sex and 'pillow talk' and it was crushing, just as he intended. He especially enjoyed telling me the fantasy that really turned him on: "My fantasy is to walk barefoot on a field of titties."

He bragged about what he could get away with: "I've got a rap sheet. I'm not ashamed of it. I was famous. I stole a banana stalk from a market and I waited in alleys and hit people on the head and took their wallets. I was known as The Banana Stalk Bandit. I was famous. And you can't testify against me because you're my wife."

He wants some kind of power that he believes he lacks and that he can steal from other people. There is nothing there for you, Jennifer, because there is no there there.

He's an empty hole in the air, like a vacuum sucking everything in, never filling up. There will never, ever be enough – enough praise, enough admiration, glory, sex, power, money; he'll never see enough groveling, tears, or bleeding wounds. Dr. Susan Forward described, in *Emotional Blackmail*, what to do when people in your life use fear, obligation, and guilt to manipulate you. It's not just a deformity. A malignant sociopath is not a complete person at all and has no insight into his defect. He learned to mimic what he thinks is the human personality. He only has two of the many parts of whole human beings, and these come at your expense: self-aggrandizement and self-protection. Self-glorification is his all-consuming need; there is no end to the bottomless pit of rage. Underlying his meanness is an aberrant vulgarity dripping with hate that he learned to hide from human beings, at least for a while.

His only other human part is self-protection - or revenge any way he can get it – preferably in cash, yours. Whenever he senses your resistance to his control, you will get (you will always get) the rage – full blast or quietly walking on your beautiful, priceless soul.

A malignant narcissist cannot be allowed in your life. When it is revenge that he wants most, that is when you will look up to see the sick, raw, suppurating sores oozing meanness from the bottom of his feet as he walks on you.

There is no limit to what he would take from you or anyone he sees as weak. A malignant narcissist sees women as low hanging fruit; there are no women he would not exploit. He actually thinks he is unique: "I'm not like other

people, I don't have a conscience." Always there is the theft, constantly looking for something to steal and someone to steal it from. And there will never be enough.

Mine was a brief marriage without laughter, kindness, or relief. My self-respect and integrity were not, as I thought, lost forever, they were just misplaced. And in the end, I did laugh in my way, at his raw meanness; just before the divorce, at his last phone call from some jail (probably to get me to ask my mother for bail money.) "Cold as ice" comes close to what I felt on the inside as I hung up on him.

He: "Suzi, this is Bill."

Me: "You Shit! You stole my mother's gas card."

He (Indignant): "I've stopped using it, Alright?" (Because it was impounded, you piece of Expletive Deleted... This computer should be smoking. Where is the sarcasm font?)

Me: (Yes, words were worthless but in the end I couldn't give him the last one.) "You better!" (Slam!!)

Robert B. Parker was kinder: "He has a ratty meanness... He hasn't any strengths, not smart or strong or good looking, or funny or tough. All he has is a kind of ratty meanness. It's not enough."

When prehistoric Alaskan Inuits had this problem – a malignant narcissist among them – when one of their fellow hunters was stealing, lying, seducing their wives, molesting their children, he ended up lost, alone on his own ice floe, never to be seen or heard from again. Now that's cold.

Lovingly,

Aunt Suzi

December, 2017

Dear Jennifer,

Thank you for telling me what you feel. I'm just as scared and just as sick of it. Yes, I will tell you what helped me through this year:

The spectacular August solar eclipse captivated me and several pet owners, some of whom drove south for perfect viewing spots, people camped all along the trajectory. It was a very big deal in Maryland. I stayed with two beautiful Chesapeake Bay Retrievers named Pearl and Jack (photos on the website [www.suzithepetsitter.com](http://www.suzithepetsitter.com)) and we watched the eclipse on TV.

I love lunar eclipses too and rejoice that science understands them now. It's fun to imagine that if I could choose to live other lives, (I already do in books) one of them would be as a prehistoric human on the Earth 40,000 generations ago seeing a lunar eclipse. What are the odds that I would be wondering at that moment...

Me: "Where the hell are we?" and as the Earth eclipsed the moon with the arc of a perfect circle, what are the odds that I would understand Earth's only language, it's shadow?

Earth to Suzi: "Look up. Look at me. I'm a big sphere and you're on it. Good luck."

I like to imagine someone would help out and give me a verbal hug like, "Don't be scared. It's going to happen. We'll face it together. Or not." Actually, that was what Rachel Maddow said on the MSNBC nightly news when she told the world that our democracy is under an ongoing cyber-attack from a hostile foreign power.

Reading helps. If I could, I'd hug the Polish astronomer and mathematician Nicolaus Copernicus who wrote and published in 1543 a rather romantic theory: "Gravity is the nostalgia of things to become spheres."

Copernicus also wrote that Earth was not set eternally in the center of the Heavens (which was the prevalent belief) but was instead moving in a circle, and furthermore, it was circling the sun. Nicolaus: "We're on a moving sphere, get used to it."

Nothing cheers me up like eating good food. I've been doing some serious knife-sharpening, I mean really sharp. My thrift-shop knives and shears and cleaver all need a lot of work. I can feel one of my winter cooking binges coming on. I found my favorite detective, Nero Wolfe's, irresistible recipe for "Fricasseed Chicken with Dumplings." (Rex Stout, 1886-1975.) I can already taste it.

I'm still on knives; I read that prehistoric Eskimos easily killed wolves with their knives. Annie Dillard wrote about it in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

This is the sort of stuff I read all winter...I like the clean urgency of these tales, the sense of being set out in a wilderness with a jackknife and a length of twine...Sometimes an Eskimo would catch a wolf with a knife. He slathered the knife with blubber and buried the hilt in snow or ice. A hungry wolf would scent the blubber, find the knife, and lick it compulsively with numbed tongue, until he sliced his tongue to ribbons, and bled to death.

Yug. When I first read that I was horrified. Later I was impressed with "my people."

The facts are that you and I, all of us here are alive because we had smart enough ancestors who adapted, didn't starve, didn't die from the epidemics, and reproduced before a jaw cracked (as they often did in adolescence) by an emerging molar. And they stayed together because "nobody, but nobody can make it out here alone." (American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou, 1928-2014.)

I believe life is a crapshoot. "Extinction is the rule. Survival is the exception." (Carl Sagan, American astronomer and astrophysicist, 1934-1996.) I believe humans are adaptable and lucky, although American tennis champion Serena Williams disagreed: "Luck has nothing to do with it."

I believe in luck like I believe in a good homemade pie. (Though precision, not luck, is the operative word in baking.) Carl Sagan again, "In order to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first create the universe...Atoms are made in the center of stars...The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies, were all made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of star stuff."

Bottom line: Don't panic. Get active. Do what you have to do. Despair is not an option.

To survive this year what helped me most was reading. Think of life as an adventure without a map. Carl Sagan said it better: "We may not know where we're going, but we're on our way."

George R.R. Martin said it best: (Game of Thrones, Clash of Kings): "A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies" said Jojen. "We need to know are not alone."

I love you too,

Aunt Suzi

Author's Note

I'm no longer going to be posting new letters on my website. Please send me an email at [suziaboard2005@gmail.com](mailto:suziaboard2005@gmail.com) if you'd like to receive further "Letters to Jennifer."