Potluck

LITTLE STORIES FROM A BIG TABLE

PAULA THOMAS

Humor, heart & a humble spirit . . . Potluck will bring back your childhood memories, remind you of your own siblings . . . with tears of laughter running down your cheeks.

— Lana Harriger Nicol, daughter, wife, mother, grandma, wannabe artist & a "real" Orange County Housefrau.

The book is great, funny, entertaining, touching, spiritual and meaningful. You have lived quite a life and people need to know about it. Thank you.

— Vicki Prelesnik, Education Consultant and Orange Unified School District teacher for over forty years.

This is amazing! So heart warming, hilarious and real. I feel privileged to have read it. Thank you for this treasure.

—Katie Janics-Geeza partner at Berding & Weil, LLP Attorneys at Law and a mother of two boys.

Ever done something so ridiculous you wish you had a hole to hide in? Well—in Paula's life, that's just "Wednesday." Her hilarious and heart-warming stories offer a first-ever peak at the life of a 1950s kid when her siblings became overnight Hollywood celebrities. And from Catalina Island, the author gives a glimpse at a wild child's life in that one-of-a-kind environment. Her antics with animals, from pythons to puppies to pigs, are a potluck of tender tales sure to put a tear in your eye and some warmth in your soul.

Growing up with six siblings in a tiny beach cottage, "You have to do something to survive." Telling funny stories about her idiotic antics and the poignant events that filled her life kept Paula's friends in stitches and kept the author sane. After winning an essay contest in the 8th grade, she saw writing as the outlet she was looking for. At the urging of friends and family, this prolific writer has written her first collection of personal stories.

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Paula Thomas

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Lastly, thank you family and friends for reading my stories through the years and saying, "Paula, you need to write a book." You folks made me believe that I had something worthy of sharing.

Why I Wrote This Book

I grew up in the early sixties, one sister in a large and slightly poor family living in a rich country. In our loud, dysfunctional, turbulent family, my sense of humor kept me sane.

All my life I have told stories and made people laugh (sometimes intentionally). My stories are about idiotic things I have done or witnessed others do, mistakes I have made, embarrassing moments I have endured, or poignant and tender realizations from seventy-four years of living.

All my life people have said, "You have got to write your stories down." After marinating these stories deliciously in my mind for more than half a century, the time has come to do just that: write them down.

Auntie Mame (the madcap, fun-loving, extravagant character created by Patrick Dennis) famously says, "Life is a banquet and most poor fools are starving to death." I think my life was a potluck. It was a veritable tasty combination of people and events, like the homespun casserole dishes I relished as a kid on Sunday evenings at the Seal Beach Methodist Church. Everyone in our life brings something to the table to feed us; sometimes what they bring wrinkles our nose, sometimes it spills over our belts, sometimes it sends us to the bathroom at 2 a.m. Not unlike some church potluck casseroles.

Some have doubted the truth of these stories but, I assure you, these events are real. Mark Twain wrote, "Truth is stranger than fiction," and I think my life and my stories can attest to that. However, if you fail to write it down quickly, any recipe you are cooking is bound to change over time. Even if the basic ingredients and the flavor remain about the same, fading memory may impact the measurements slightly.

Mark Twain wrote, "Truth is stranger than fiction" and I think my life and my stories can attest to that.

When two of my sisters were discovered on a local Los Angeles TV talent program in 1951 and later went on to become RCA recording artists and film and radio stars, the potluck was kicked up a notch and turned into dinner theater.

Our little poor-as-mice family got to rub shoulders with the likes of Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra, Esther Williams, and Conrad Hilton (meeting all the grown-up celebrities wasn't that big a deal to us kids; they were Mom and Dad's idols, but not ours). A much bigger deal to us kids was that we got to meet the *Mickey Mouse Club Mouseketeers* and the cast of *Space Patrol*, which were TV programs we actually watched!

So many people—friends, family, strangers, even critters—brought something to this potluck to be shared. I just put the hot dishes on this table and the cold dishes on that table, and humor was almost always the dessert. And the whole meal became my life.

Looking back, I see now that it was all more bountiful than a small-town girl dared dream. And having finally written it all down, I'm feeling really full.

Paula Thomas

1

The Beach Jacket

1951

Her Singer sewing machine was the most valuable item Mom brought along when my family moved to California from Kentucky. This move happened before I was born and right after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. America declared war and was in desperate need of airplanes for the war effort. California needed men to build those airplanes and if the government started rationing gasoline, my parents feared they would be stuck in Ashland, Kentucky, until the war ended, whenever that would be. So it was with patriotic fervor and pioneering spirit that my parents loaded their new Chrysler to bulging with four kids and all the belongings they could heft on top and stuff inside. There was no way Mom's Singer sewing machine would be left behind.

The trip to California was not without drama. My older sister, Kay, almost died from bronchitis that developed into pneumonia. She had a high fever and a horrible cough. My parents were frantic. The local doctor came to the tiny

1945 This picture was taken before my parents bought the beach cottage at 232 5th Street in Seal Beach and before Alice was born. Left to right: Kay, Judy, Mom holding Rex, Cynthia, me, and Sharon.

motel the family bunked in because of Kay's illness, and he injected her with a drug that had just come on the market. "They say this stuff works miracles, and we need one here," the small-town doctor told my frightened parents.

That drug was Penicillin and it *was* the miracle they needed. My mom told us later, "I knew we almost lost Kay, because the doctor came to our door the following morning to follow up on Kay's condition." Evidently, that meant he was very worried.

"By God," the doctor said in delighted amazement the next morning. "That stuff *does* work miracles."

The family settled into a big old house in Pomona, not far from the hospital where I was born a few years later.

After my birth, in 1943, we moved to Seal Beach, a coastal community about thirty miles west of Pomona.

Because World War II was raging at the time, Dad worked a lot of overtime at Keiser Steel Mill and was able to save enough money to purchase a small, wood-framed beach cottage just a block and a half from the Pacific Ocean. "We wanted you kids to grow up with the freedom to run and play at the beach," Dad told us later.

Seal Beach was a very typical small town when I was growing up. It had a Main Street that ran perpendicular from Pacific Coast Highway (the major thoroughfare running north and south through California) down to the pleasure pier at the end of the beach and out into the water. Even today, Seal Beach has kept its small-town charm and is a friendly and inviting place.

My earliest memories of living in Seal Beach were of walking down to the beach and chasing the seals (for which the city was named) back into the water. The big brown sea creatures would sun themselves on the warm sand and they looked like stacks of soft brown pillows, until you got up close and smelled the salty, musty odor on their skins. The beach was crowded with the creatures, big and small, and they yapped noisily when disturbed by a bunch of boisterous kids like my brother and sisters. The town was originally called Bay City, but the seals won out.

Seal Beach Elementary, my grade school, was located just a few blocks from the beach on the corner of Twelfth Street and Pacific Coast Highway. It was the school I attended from kindergarten through the sixth grade, when the town built J. H. McGaugh, the school up on the hill (the hill was really just a gentle slope above our town).

Two milestones in my school career that I clearly remember happened in the third grade. First, third grade was the year that each student got his or her own desk. Prior to that, we had sat at long tables we shared with our fellow students. My first desk was a brown wooden desk with an attached chair and a flip-up top with an ink-well on the corner edge. (In those days, we learned cursive writing and we used pen and ink. Boy, have things changed.) The second milestone was that third-graders were allowed to attend the annual end-of-year school picnic at the beach.

Once a year, in the last week of school, the students of grades three through five would walk the four or five blocks to the beach for a picnic. It was the highlight of the school year and it was the only time, in my third-grade mind, that our teachers seemed approachable and human. At the beach picnic, they seemed to relax, and we actually saw them smile. Maybe it was because the year was ending and summer vacation was near, or, more likely, having fun together made the teachers see us as people and not just little human projects that needed to be taught, improved, and repaired.

The day before the big picnic, a bunch of us girls were gathered by the monkey bars at recess, talking about the picnic. The main topic of the conversation was beach jackets. It seemed to me that every girl in my class was getting a new beach jacket for the occasion. "I'm getting a new beach jacket too," I chimed in, proudly. "My mother is making me a beautiful beach jacket tonight." Back in those days, most mothers sewed.

Only two of my friends were actually *buying* new beach jackets. Yvonne, my best friend, and the only one in our group whose mother owned a business and worked outside the home, told us about hers without a hint of bragging. "It's red and white gingham, and has a terry cloth hood. Mom ordered it from the new Sears catalog."

Without any of Yvonne's humility, Karen, who was the wealthiest girl in our class, told us about her new jacket in a show-off and snobby way. "Mine was purchased from Lovely Little Ladies in Belmont Shore." None of my friends shopped in Belmont Shore, it was far too expensive and trendy. Then Karen added, with a smug smile, "My beach jacket was made in San Francisco, and it is china blue with small white stripes and gold buttons on the pockets." I had never heard of San Francisco, but it sounded like somewhere important and exotic. We all kept talking about the jackets and the upcoming picnic until the bell rang, and then we scampered like rabbits back to class.

I knew my beach jacket would be wonderful. I had confidence in my mother because she was a seamstress extraordinaire and a clothing designer at heart. Mom had already purchased the fabric and planned to sew it that evening. The cloth was yellow and white with an all-over pattern of sand buckets and seashells. Mom planned to line the jacket in white terry cloth, and she had large red rickrack for trim. I was sure my jacket would look just as good as Karen's, even if it was not made in that stupid San Francisco place.

After dinner and the dishes, Mom put her portable Singer sewing machine on the kitchen table. As I always did when Mom was sewing for me, I made her a cup of coffee, with sugar and lots of cream. I wasn't concerned

that Mom was just starting the garment at bedtime. We had sewn Halloween costumes on many occasions and she used to say, "I do my best work under pressure." I was confident the beach jacket would be ready for the picnic the following morning.

Mom cut out the pattern carefully and pinned it for me to try on the pieces. I remember the uncomfortable feeling of the thin paper pattern on my skin and the occasional pin prick I received as she made tucks in her design. After a couple of adjustments, Mom sat down at the old Singer and started to sew the lining.

Mom threaded the bobbin and the needle, lowered the pressure foot, and started to sew. The fabric bunched up and the thread caught in a big clump under the pressure foot. "Shoot," Mom said.

It took several minutes to pull the fabric clear of the needle and cut through the mass of thread stuck to the bobbin. She did this very carefully, so as not to damage the fabric. When everything seemed to be set right, Mom started to sew again, and the same thing happened; the fabric bunched up and the thread caught under the pressure foot.

"Doggone it!" Mom said, irritated. She took the machine bobbin apart and rethreaded the entire machine. "Maybe this bobbin is faulty," she said out loud to herself.

Mom filled a new bobbin with thread and began the process again. No go. The needle stuck in the fabric just like before. Frustrated, Mom was not going to give up easily. She took out the Singer sewing machine instruction pamphlet, which had been torn and mended in several places with cellophane tape over the years. After studying the instructions for several minutes, Mom adjusted a couple of dials on the

Easter morning when I was in the third grade. Left to right: Alice, Rex, Paula, Judy, Kay, Sharon, and Cynthia.

Singer. Then she made a trial run on some different fabric. But, still no go. The machine refused to sing *or* sew. After another hour of adjusting and struggling, it was evident the Singer was broken. She turned to me.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie. The darn machine won't work. Maybe we can borrow something you can wear from one of your sisters."

A sorrowful little third grader went off to bed, because there would be no new beach jacket to wear. At the age of eight, my world was clearly ending. I had told my friends I'd have a beautiful new beach jacket for the picnic, and now I wouldn't. I was sure the news would make Karen very happy, and I felt pretty sure she would accuse me of

lying. Sad and disappointed, I cried myself to sleep. Third grade, much like war, is hell. In the morning, I was in no hurry to get up and head to school. I walked slowly into the kitchen where Mom was packing lunches and fixing breakfast for the kids. To my astonishment, on a hanger next to the cupboard hung *my* beautiful new beach jacket, just like Mom had promised. It was yellow and white with an all-over pattern of sand pails and seashells, lined in white terry cloth, and decorated with big red rickrack.

"You got the sewing machine working again?" I asked my mom, happily. Mom didn't answer. She just smiled and went about her morning tasks. I tried the jacket on. I squealed and jumped around the table with tears of joy rolling down my cheeks. "Look everyone. The beach jacket fits perfectly. It's beautiful, Mom. Oh, thank you."

This was just one example of my mother's tenacity and pioneering spirit. She wasn't about to let a broken sewing machine get in the way of her child's happiness. No matter how tired or overworked this mother of seven was, she was not going to let her daughter be disappointed, even if it meant *staying up all night and sewing the jacket by hand.*

"It was a labor of love," Mom told me later. "It was a labor of love."

2

The Seal Beach School of Dance

1951

I grew up with a best friend who was prettier than me, richer than me, and had six fewer siblings than me. So, it really wasn't surprising to me that Yvonne was going to take tap dancing lessons at the new Seal Beach School of Dance and I wasn't.

In a small town like Seal Beach, the opening of a new business was a big event. When Yvonne and I saw the sign for the Seal Beach School of Dance go up next to the drug store, we were so excited. The sign said that the teacher was from New York City and had danced on Broadway. "Just think," I told Yvonne excitedly, "a real New York dancer is going to be teaching in our town." We could hardly wait.

The sound of the old upright piano rang softly in my ears as I peered through the window of the Seal Beach School of Dance. I stood for a long time, staring as my best friend and all the other little girls lined up in a row