

My Writing Life Begins, Age Six

by Marianne Gingher

Editor's Note: This story marks the beginning of a yearlong series in which Marianne Gingher will contribute essays that are part of a work in progress titled A Woman at Work and Play, a memoir focusing on the influences on her writing life, academic and otherwise.

My writing life begins with a whopping lie I tell my first-grade teacher. It is a calculated and dramatic lie, a lie with an agenda. I will not be punished for it or suffer a shred of remorse. On the contrary, I will be rewarded. Mine will be a long uphill slog toward artistic integrity, achieved only decades later, but the lie—fiction begetting more fiction—will have started it all.

I am six years old. It is 1953 and my best friend Pam has gotten a *Ding Dong School Book*. I'm about to detonate with envy. I want a *Ding Dong School Book* more than I have ever wanted anything, more than I want Pam's new Madame Alexander doll, which she brings to school and asks me to hold for her during recess so she can ride the merry-go-round. While she is spinning, I rub the doll's peachy face in the playground cinders, but Pam is so dizzy when she climbs off the ride that she doesn't notice that the doll has developed an irreparable case of acne. Why did I do such a thing? I am still so astonished by this memory that I can even recall the weather conditions that hovered over all (it was a brilliant cold and sunshiny day with a cloudless cobalt blue sky, the kind of heartless sky that often accompanies funerals; just the sort of day the devil likes because the shadows are so richly dark that he can hide in them; pleats of heated air rippled over the chimney tops and you could smell the gruff, dragon breath of furnace-fired coal). The legacy of my memory is that along with the good, I can recollect every bad or hostile thing I ever did: memory as comfort and joy, memory as penitentiary complete with torture chamber.

The television show *Ding Dong School* predates *Mister*

Rogers' Neighborhood and *Sesame Street* by many years. A baggy old woman in a black dress hosts the show. Her name is Miss Frances. She is always seated, like Whistler's Mother. She wears her hair in a bun, low on her neck, and she is deadly serious about fun. She reads stories with the gravity of a child psychologist. She works sock puppets and draws pictures. There is something she talks about called a *Ding Dong School Book*, and this must be my first brush with advertising that really penetrates. She holds the *Ding Dong School Book* up to her viewers and describes the hours of fun it will provide.

This is no ordinary coloring book. It's a revolutionary version of the form because every page is *blank*. There are no drawings to color in, no printed riddles, no find-the-squirrel-that's-hidden-in-the picture sorts of activities. The stark idea of blankness fascinates me. Like an unmarred patch of snow you're compelled to step in, blankness unfurls its maverick opportunities, open invitations to the stampede of invention. I am wild for its permission.

At school, Pam shows up with a *Ding Dong School Book* tucked under her arm, and she lets me hold it, open it, flutter the abundant, soft newsprint pages, sniff them. They smell a little bit like oatmeal. Every one is dazzlingly blank, as promised, except for the *Ding Dong School* logo in the upper right-hand corner. It's a bell with a tilted handle, as if it's ringing. I'm a little disappointed about the bell. No matter what you draw, there's always going to be a bell in the upper right-hand corner, advertising *Ding Dong School*. If you draw ghosts drifting out of a haunted house, there will still be that stupid bell, reminding you it's just a picture you've made, not a fantastic world you've slipped into. Nevertheless, I do not rub the *Ding Dong School Book* in the playground cinders. It's the seed of an illuminated manuscript and I accord it all due respect.

Pam loves to draw like me, but she is neater about it. I admire neatness and try to copy it, but I'm a catawampus girl. My shoes are always gobbling up my socks. My fine hair tan-

gles. The hemline of my skirt droops where I've kicked out the stitching playing acrobat. I get impatient coloring between the lines and I scribble. You ruin things if you scribble. Pam doesn't scribble. She is methodical and precise. She doesn't ever break the tips off her crayons. Her red crayon—everybody's favorite—is saved only for coloring the lips of beautiful princesses and queens. If it breaks in two or has to be peeled, Pam asks her mother for a whole new box of crayons.

When we spend an afternoon drawing, our favorite subject is graveyards. We have a formula. Take a sheet of Blue Horse notebook paper and turn it on its side so that the vertical red margin line runs horizontally across the bottom of the page. Take your pencil and trace over the red line and you have the foundation for the graveyard. It's a flat graveyard, no hills. Scribble it green and you have unmown grass. Color it *neatly* green and you have freshly clipped grass. Draw the tombstones on top of the line, as many as you can fit in. Some can be plain crosses, some arched, some—for rich people—look like castle turrets.



"Then, one night, something terrible happens."

The fun part is deciding who is dead. If you're mad at somebody, like your brother, you can put a real name on a tombstone. Or you can do celebrities like Davy Crockett. Write the birth and the death dates on in pencil. Draw flowers that loved ones have placed on the graves. Make up stories about the funerals and who came and what sorts of diseases and accidents people died from.

Sometimes when Pam and I are lying on the floor of her living room, on our stomachs, drawing, her brother Scott shows up. He's about five years older than us, an oafish sixth grader and a saboteur. I'm scared of him because Pam's scared of him. The best thing to do is not to speak to him, no matter if he pretends to be interested or nice. The first word or two that pops out of his mouth might be nice, but it's bait. He's waiting to egg you with bully words. He's always scowling and sulking and dragging his feet. He'll try to stomp a foot on our

graveyard pictures if his mom isn't near by. Mostly she's always around, like a prison matron, only pretty and kind. Her voice is buttery Southern soft and when she reprimands Scott she doesn't shout because Scott knows that if he disobeys her he'll have his father, Ted, to reckon with. Ted is an older version of Scott and built to last.

Scott is the first critic of my creative life, the threat of his monstrous disregard lurking on the periphery of my artistic jubilee.

Pam's a better drawer than me because she is patient. I want to rush through my drawings because new ideas keep crowding my head. Her work is methodical; mine is all flurry and smudge. But as we advance in school, my drawing gets better than Pam's because she stops drawing. She gets bored with it. She decides to be good at kickball instead or arithmetic or boys. By seventh grade she will be so good at boys that she will have left me for dead.

I am grateful to Pam for liking to draw as much as me, in the beginning. I don't yet have the sense that making art can

feel lonesome or require you to go off by yourself for long periods of time. In the beginning, art is a social activity the same as lunch or recess. We both have plenty of confidence about it because our parents regularly compliment our efforts, and neither of our mothers ever complains about buying us new crayons. Which is why, when Pam's mother buys her a *Ding Dong School Book* as a reward for suffering through a dental appointment, I think I'm due a reward too. But I can't just ask for a *Ding Dong School Book*, can I? I have to *deserve* it, for being brave or enterprising.

"But you don't need to go to the dentist," my mother reminds me when I ask. Dr. Pringle filled two of my cavities about a month ago. Besides, Dr. Pringle has his own system of rewards for stoic children: plaster-of-Paris sculptures of Snow White and Cinderella, Bambi, all seven Dwarfs, Tweety Bird and Sylvester, Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd that he crafts himself for a hobby.

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