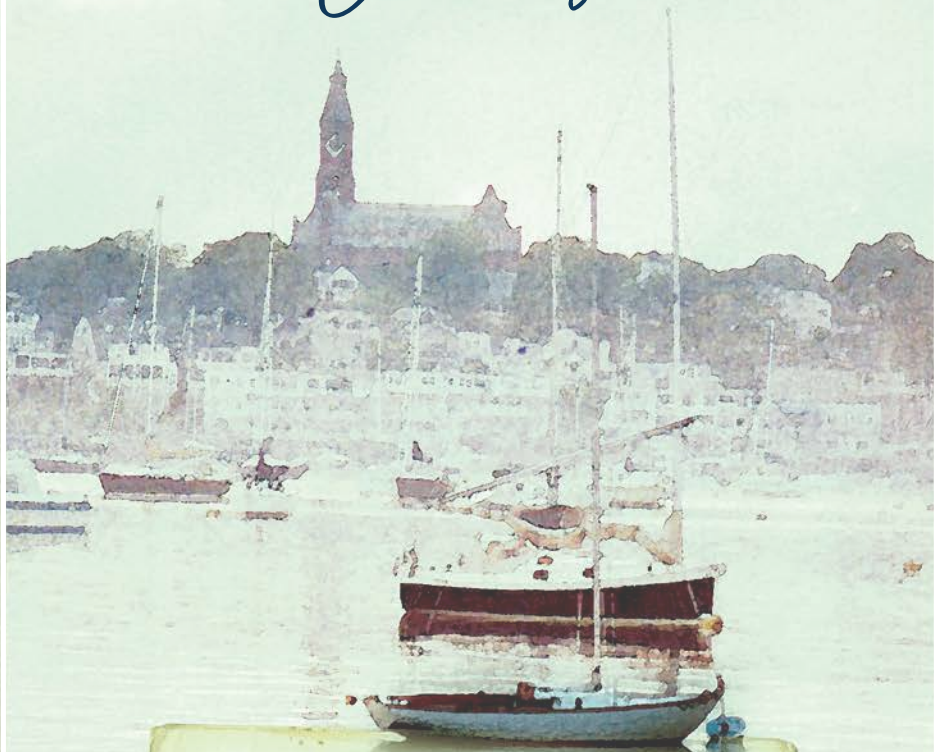


Robert S. Newman



**MESSAGES
FROM AFAR
and Other Stories**



ROBERT S. NEWMAN

MESSAGES
FROM AFAR
AND OTHER STORIES

BOSTON • 2023

Robert S. Newman

Messages from Afar and Other Stories


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To Sudha and our 55 years so far

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 9

USA

On Gossamer Wings 17
Diamonds Are Forever 28
A Lifetime Collection. 29
Gambling up a Storm. 39
New York Vignettes. 44
What's In a Name? 57
Ages of a Small People 59
A Javelina Story 62
Ants 72
Messages from Afar 74
Marbles in a City of Tin. 86

THE WORLD

Eating	93
Urk!	107
Epitaphs	113
Speaking Japanese.	119
A Traveler Tale	154
Jaritari Dreaming	156
The Indians Meet	162
The Whorehouse of P'ungsan.	182
An Idaho Connection	193
Karma	196
Last Tango in Santiago.	208
Children of the Mountain Eagle	219
One of the Tribe.	252
Ambition x2.	255
A Newspaper Photo.	266
Filmstar Fantasies	270
Well, You <i>Might</i> Bump Into Them	280
The End of Paradise Lost	283
The Middle of Nowhere!	289

INTRODUCTION

I was born during World War II in Boston and lived the first six years of my life in a Brookline triple decker. My parents bought an old Victorian house in Marblehead in 1949 and we moved there. Marblehead in those days still boasted fields, woods, grassy hills, secret ponds, and abundant wildlife on shore and in the sea. Such small towns had more tenuous connections to the outside world than today. I loved it, even if there were some drawbacks. Outside of school, I spent my childhood roaming the hills and haunting the beaches. I helped a retired admiral grow strawberries on the field where the Eveleth School stands today, I caught numerous snakes, I practiced archery on the greens that became Vinnin Square, I read as many books on Oz or the adventures of Tarzan as I could find. I broke a few windows with green apples or snowballs, and sometimes went to Boston to attend the Explorers Club at the Museum of Science. Youth is a rainbow, how to explain it?

I grew up in Marblehead and after a two-year stint at the private Tower School, went to the Glover School and Marblehead High. Never a brilliant student, I only did well in what interested me, mainly history and languages, though Biology kept my attention. I immersed myself in playing the oboe and running track every spring. I thought I might enter the musical world as a career. At the end of my junior year, I somehow got selected to represent Marblehead on an American Field Service exchange student scholarship and traveled to Japan to stay with a Japanese family, an event that proved to be the key one of my life. I discarded my musical ambitions and turned

to Asia. At the same time, I conceived a great desire to travel as much as I could.

On graduation, I suddenly plunged into an Ivy League world at Cornell—people from everywhere, a fabulous library, late nights, beery discussions, and high standards that I struggled to keep up. I studied Japanese, Asian Studies, Anthropology and a good deal else. In the three summers between my academic years, I spent one in Marblehead, one teaching English in Japan and one working on a kibbutz in Israel. After the final year, I joined a university team that worked on community development in Honduras, then went off for two years to work in India as a Peace Corps Volunteer. There I met the woman who would be my wife, Sudha Dubey. While I returned to Ithaca for graduate school, she worked in England for two years until we could solve financial and family problems. We married at last in 1968, but soon returned to India so that I could do my doctoral research for a year in villages around Lucknow, where I had served in the Peace Corps.

My experiences in India convinced me that the Vietnam War was an ill-conceived folly. Back in Ithaca, I took part in anti-war demonstrations and activities.

I received my doctorate in Anthropology, Organizational Behavior and South Asian Studies in early 1972. With a PhD came unemployment. I have never been ambitious, dreaming neither of fame nor fortune. I wanted to have an interesting life and again, to travel. I had thought to work in international development, but I emerged from graduate school in the post-Vietnam period of decline, so after a year of frustration, I finally landed a job teaching at the University of Chicago, then at SUNY Cortland. After an amazing series of bureaucratic hurdles, I wound up with a two-year teaching job at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. I stayed for nearly sixteen, getting tenure along the way. La Trobe wanted to organize its programs in a new way. One of the steps they took

was to distribute the several anthropologists among different departments. I taught Anthropology in the Education Department as I had done research on Indian schools and how their effectiveness related to the culture around them. My research work now concerned mainly Goa, the former Portuguese colony on India's west coast. If the job didn't always satisfy me, I made many friends at La Trobe and in the city, had a good life, enjoyed two wonderful sabbatical years, was sent to teach in China and Korea for shorter terms, and came to love Australia and its vast dreaming landscape of secret gum-lined creeks and silence. I published my first book—on grassroots education in India. But my father passed away in 1989, leaving me the house back in Marblehead. A choice stood before me—I could sell the house and remain in Melbourne for good, sticking to my tenured job for another nineteen years, or I could resign and return home to an uncertain future. I took the latter.

In those days, in Australian universities, if you worked for ten years you got “Long Service Leave” which meant three months with full pay to do anything you wanted. I had not taken this leave though I'd worked nearly sixteen years. The university readily gave me the cash. I told Sudha that we would not bank this money, but spend it all on traveling while neither of us had job responsibilities. A bit risky, but it all turned out well. We went around the world for six months, then to a conference in Holland, then for five months to South America. We returned to Marblehead in early 1991, having blown the lot. Sudha got a job at Marblehead's public library and I began to teach English to newly-arrived Russian immigrants on the North Shore. We continued in these jobs for years. I also kept up my academic writing and going to occasional conferences, publishing another book (on Goa) at the end of 2000. It contained all the articles I'd published over the years. In 2019, I published a two-volume set of books on Goan anthropology,

reprinting much of the first book and adding a considerable amount more.

After getting back on our feet financially, Sudha and I continued to travel. If I did not have a brilliant career, at least I succeeded in having an interesting life.

My local students, almost all from the former Soviet Union, had never traveled much due to Iron Curtain restrictions. Neither did they know what it was like to grow up in America. In addition, I wanted them to try to express themselves in English, to use as much vocabulary and grammar as they could. Of course, I was curious about their lives. A system evolved in one class in which we would read a story by some well-known American author then decide what the major theme was. They would write a story on that theme and so would I. I collected their stories, corrected them and handed them back with comments. Their stories opened another world for me, even if their English often left a bit to be desired. I got enthusiastic, the students liked my stories of places and times they'd never seen, and so I wrote many more stories on my own for them to read, over a hundred in all.

From 2003, I began to teach an annual course at the *Explorers*, an adult education organization in Salem. Though I taught a couple of anthropology-type courses, I mainly talked about India, Australia, and the countries that I'd traveled to over the years. For some years I have taught a course entitled "Off the Beaten Path", giving it numerous times, each one about different destinations. Some of the students suggested that I should write down my experiences; my Russian students also asked me why I did not publish the stories they'd read. I'm afraid that a lifelong habit of reading convinces me that my abilities as a writer are far from superlative. Nevertheless, at last I decided to follow their advice. In 2015 I published a book called *Marblehead Traveller*. Now, eight years later, this is the second such volume, presenting various experiences and encounters

with interesting individuals over my lifetime. This introduction is almost the same one as found in the first book.

I have long pretended to be a photographer as well. Photographs catch a moment, catch a detail composed in the eye of the photographer. Some writers spin elaborate plots, tell complicated tales with many characters and engrossing action. I have only tried to relate some of my experiences and observations over a lifetime. They are “photos” that haven’t been photoshopped very much. All the stories here are true in almost all details. “Almost” because the truth is hard to find, it is extremely slippery and subject to interpretation at all times. If you can exclude a Pepsi Cola sign from your photo of the Taj Mahal, you can also overlook some aspect of a situation, you can interpret events as you wish, and maybe you can stick someone’s face in there—a person who wasn’t there at the time. In that way, writing and photography resemble each other. In any case, welcome to my album of Memory Pictures.

Bob Newman

June 2023, Marblehead

USA

ON GOSSAMER WINGS

*Beneath the stars' far crystal sigh
Toiling, running as death drew nigh
While we dared not deny our ancient Kings,
Life flew by on gossamer wings.*

—Jalaluddin Isfahani,
12th century Persian poet

At the age of six, I saw Jean Patrick for the first time. Only the finest of trceries, the most painstakingly discovered etchings on the film of my childhood memories still remain. I remember how my tiny brother, then only three, and I ran wildly, like young baboons, around her yard, amongst the apple trees, around the pear and cherry, plunging through the bushes that enclosed a small garden, and down the dirt driveway along the west side of the old gray house. We'd lived in a small apartment in Brookline till then; Marblehead's open spaces spurred us to run free. When we finally calmed down and came inside, up the creaky back steps and through the cramped anterooms of the faded kitchen, there she was, sitting on a high, tight sofa in the living room. No carpet graced the floor, not a picture on the wall. She'd already removed most of her belongings. The bare room presented an immense expanse of shining wooden floor before Jean as she posed there, to be caught by my childish memory, with her two blond cocker spaniels and an enormous black and white cat named

Pete. My parents inspected the house, but I do not remember them doing it. The stairs (our Brookline apartment was all on one floor) rose up to the second floor in two flights. Risers painted white, the smooth wooden steps shone in the spring light. Gene and I began sliding down them at once, bumping our behinds on each one. Jean laughed. She was unused to children, but she didn't mind our excitement. She had the laugh of a parrot; hearty, slightly raucous. I didn't notice at the time, but Jean wasn't tall, maybe five foot four, her black hair already had tinges of gray, her long face was not beautiful at all, rather horsey in fact. She drove an old black Packard that sat by the bushes bordering the driveway.

The year was 1949. My parents bought the house a few months later and we came to live in Marblehead. Jean moved to a small, white, Victorian carriage house behind a gray barn just up the street. If there hadn't been so many trees, we could have seen it from our kitchen window. She came over to visit my parents off and on. My father always offered her a glass of whiskey, she always accepted. They would sit and talk about small things, the neighbors and the town. She'd laugh that raucous laugh. On Christmas Day she would come around for a few minutes. We boys understood that she would always be carrying two envelopes for us, each with a dollar bill inside. Her snowy coat and boots, the chill air that swept in through the front door as she took out the presents and laughed, all grew to be a part of the Christmas season.

Sometimes we went over to visit Jean in her neat little house full of old treasures and heavy wooden furniture. My mother preferred simple lines and uncluttered spaces, but a vast army of knickknacks pervaded Jean's rooms; they stood watch on top of everything. I had to be extremely careful not to make any fast movements. An old lady's house smelled of lavender and the soaps she used. Jean existed on air, I thought. I never saw her eat anything, though she loved that glass of

whiskey. She would give me milk and cookies when I visited. She liked the color purple, and so did I.

The years passed by. During high school I hardly ever saw Jean, except at Christmas, when she would still bring over the envelopes, though inflation had raised the amount to two dollars. If I were not home when she delivered them, my mother would push me to go visit Jean to say thanks. It was a chore; wrapped up in my schoolboy activities, I had no time for neighborly niceties. Then I left for Japan, for college, for India—I got married, entered graduate school. Twenty years had passed since I'd first met Jean. I sent an occasional postcard to her in Marblehead. I almost never visited her, yet heard infrequent news from my mother about a nighttime party at her house, about how she was still driving that old Packard.

My mother died in 1971. Jean came to the funeral, hugged me, and offered some conventional condolences. I was glad to see her. I realized suddenly that I'd known her all my life. She drank a large shot of whiskey and left. I saw that her hair was completely gray then, but it was still thick, hung down to her shoulders in 1930s style. She told me she planned to move. She had sold the old carriage house and would shift to an apartment on Washington Street downtown.

My wife Sudha and I left for Australia. There, at the bottom of the world, in the vast expanse of a city that smelled of eucalyptus and lemons, I began to miss Marblehead, I started to grasp what I had sacrificed to start a new immigrant life. Would I ever go home again? I couldn't see the future, but Australia had offered me the chance I couldn't find in America. Nostalgia set in. Now in my early thirties, I realized the blind heedlessness of youth. My mother had died before I could know her. I began to worry the same would happen with everyone else I knew in my old life. At the end of 1975, after two years away, I returned to Marblehead. I paid a long visit to Jean and another large-eyed cat, Toby. We sat in the fading



Jean Patrick at 75

light of a winter afternoon amongst the bric-a-brac, the little army of treasures that had accompanied Jean throughout her long life. I began to ask her about her past, for her memories of the old neighborhood. I sat listening to that slightly raucous old New England voice. She was seventy five years old then.

Over the years, I visited Jean every time I came home. I would tell her a little about Australia or India, but then listen for two hours or more,

asking her questions, absorbing all the past that flowed from her like a river, tiny picture postcards from the past, validated, proven by all the little cups, statues, pincushions, china boxes, and trinkets that Jean had lovingly kept beside her, a couple of family oil portraits painted in dark 19th century style. She never offered me anything to eat or drink, nor did I expect it. She never mentioned that she was glad to see me, though I know she was delighted because if anyone telephoned she would whisper, "I've got a visitor." and get rid of them pronto. New England always spoke to me there, a solid old New England feeling, a rock-bound character that would endure no matter what. Emotions did not count, they lay always hidden away from view. Her matter-of-fact, no-nonsense manner remained the same over all those years. Occasionally she'd still laugh that raucous laugh, but quieter now, not so surprising. Visiting Jean, I felt my years fall away. I walked my childhood streets of wonder again. She told me dozens of stories about the neighborhood, revealed all the long-forgotten scandals about people

who had moved out decades ago, people who wore the heavy clothes of another time. I felt that fresh breeze coming off the ocean, heard the sea gulls' mewing cries, smelled that rough starfish in my small boy's hand. I saw the brown grass waving again on the hills amongst the blueberry bushes and watched the retired admiral-farmer plow his fields.

"My grandfather left rainy Scotland in 1840 for a better life on the cold shores of Nova Scotia." Jean told me. "His only brother emigrated at about the same time to New Zealand. They never saw one another again. A single exchange of letters took at least six months in those days. My father moved down to Boston to study chemical engineering, which was a rare profession then. His career took off immediately and by the time I was born, in the last days of December, 1900, my parents enjoyed a wealthy lifestyle. He became an expert in the chemistry of beer and travelled all over to fix brewery problems! Yes, I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth! We travelled around the world on ships, stopping for a few months here and there so that Father could exercise his skills in favor of some company or other. I started travelling at the age of six weeks. I passed my early years on board ship, where the crew spoiled me rotten at every opportunity. They'd always give me little presents and candies. I was usually the only child on board. We had a Chinese servant named "John", who took care of me, specially. I used to pull his pigtail. When my behavior began to be too awful, my parents stopped in New Zealand for a year or so, and put me in a private school to "straighten me out". That's when I got to know my New Zealand cousin, Sylvia. We played together every day and became lifelong friends, though she was three years older than I.

When my father suddenly died at a young age, all this life came to an end. Though we still lived in our Victorian house in Chestnut Hill, Brookline where we each had plenty of room, it wasn't the same. After a few years, Mother remarried in Bos-

ton, to a wealthy brewery owner, who was Mother's widowed brother-in-law. He already had three children. Although we still lived a life of luxury, with a Stanley Steamer and chauffeur, a house by the sea in Marblehead, and private schools for my step-brother Edward and me, we didn't travel much anymore except to go to Bermuda in the winter. There, when I was a young girl, I used to meet William Howard Taft, the ex-President, who was so big that he took up the whole sidewalk! Still, he used to speak to me—he was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court then.

Every summer we left Brookline and came to our house perched on the cliffs at Marblehead, looking out over the sea to Ram's Island near Preston Beach. I was just finishing high school in 1920 when lightning struck. Prohibition put the breweries out of business. My stepfather had thought about going in for fruit juices, but he'd never done anything about it. Now it was too late. Though we were not destitute, everything had to be cut back. We decided to sell the Brookline house and move to Marblehead for good. Winters right by the edge of the sea, on the rocks there, threatened to be too cold. So, we bought a second house further inland, beyond the railway tracks, in an old orchard on Clifton Avenue. It had been built by a doctor around 35 years previously. It's funny today, but we used to migrate a few hundred yards each fall from the ocean's edge, to the other house.* I remember how Robert Rose (an admiral in the US Navy who went to Antarctica with Byrd) used to drive his horse cart down to the beach beside our house to collect seaweed to fertilize his fields. He would drive right across part of our lawn, though we asked him not to. He wouldn't listen. He was always as fresh as green paint!***

* The gray house that would become my lifelong home.

** I only ever heard that expression from Jean—it echoed down from the nineteenth century and I'm keeping it alive still.

Jean's stepbrother died in his thirties, suddenly. I never heard much about her stepsisters. She was left to care for two sickly parents on her own. Her stepfather never recovered from the blow of losing his businesses and died in the Thirties. In the great influenza pandemic after World War I, Jean nearly died too. The illness left her so weak that college became out of the question, if she'd ever thought of it, and she fit into no profession. Good-natured, cheerful Jean tamped down her ambition. She'd missed her further education, nor did she have many intellectual pretensions. She lived quietly with her ailing mother till just after the war's end, her mother passed away. At age 48, Jean was left alone. No relatives, no job, no education, no experience beyond the home. She was a child of the pre-1910 era, now stranded in another time.

She sold us her family home, befriending my parents as well, treating my brother and me as 'godchildren' with Christmas presents. Though hardly remarkable today, you should remember that in 1949, most parts of Marblehead had "gentleman's agreements"—the neighbors undertook not to sell their house to Jews. Jean never hesitated. I understood much later—her early childhood roaming the world with educated parents had opened her mind in ways foreign to the small, seaside neighborhood. Some people never forgave her. But her wider experience remained far in the past. She lived on, quietly, frugally. Certainly, she had some money, perhaps stocks, bonds or securities. I could not ask. If she lived without luxury, she could survive indefinitely. The Packard served her for how many years? Her only indulgence was that glass of Old Granddad bourbon each night.

Jean had not grown up religious, but when a new Lutheran church appeared on Humphrey Street in the early fifties, she became a member and soon busied herself with a myriad church activities, even singing in the choir, taking on an office—which we should remember was highly unusual at

the time. She went to play cards and chat with her circle of friends often. Every year she gave several parties and hosted church activities at her house. My parents attended some of them. I remember one night my mother returned from Jean's, marveling at how she had met a woman from New Zealand there, such a faraway place!

Jean had had three suitors, back before the war, but they died unexpectedly, one after the other. This experience unnerved Jean, made her feel like a jinx; she abandoned the idea of marriage. With a lifestyle like hers, limited to church activities and hen parties, chances of meeting anyone were slim. She read almost nothing, did not follow world news, and took little interest in town politics. I noticed that she was not fond of movies, but watched television often, mostly the shows with jokes, chatter, and light music. In summer, she would go down to Preston Beach as she had for decades, and march right into the often-frigid sea. She loved to tell about the past—it made up a lot of what she had. As I learned about Jean over the years, visiting her on gray winter afternoons, I began to envisage her as a sea bird, lighter than air, flying through life untouched. The wind of the past bore her over the troubles, the pains, and the delights of most people. No family, no passion, no work, no intellectual activity. Jean lived in a tiny world, but lived happily nonetheless. She bore no children to give her grief. No husband to betray, disturb or threaten her. She never knew a nasty boss, a sneaky colleague, or the dirty tricks of people seeking power. She basked in the affection of her church fellows, who loved her good nature and willingness to help. Her second cousin Sylvia's son had come from New Zealand to Boston to be a professor. He and his wife took Jean on long car trips—and she drove part of the time too—to Florida or to Canada. Certainly, Jean knew blue skies in later life, but not wide ones.

In 1977, Sudha and I travelled to New Zealand from where we lived in Melbourne, rented a car and drove around both

islands. In Wellington, we visited Sylvia Milburn, Jean's only living cousin—the same girl she'd played with in that long-vanished world of steamship travel—now an ailing 79-year-old grandmother, who showed us ancient photographs and told about her two sons, one a school principal, the other the chemistry professor in Boston. I took Sylvia's picture under a spreading *pohutukawa* tree in her back yard. I realized during our conversation that this was the very lady who'd met my mother twenty-odd years before at Jean's party. A breeze blowing off Wellington harbor rattled the windows.

The story is almost done now. We returned after sixteen years in Australia to that old gray house on Clifton Avenue, now more than a century old. Just after that, Jean left the water running in her bathtub on Washington Street downtown. It overflowed and damaged the ceiling of the apartment below, where the landlady lived. Upset, she told Jean, now 90 years old, to find a new place to live. She did. She rented a smaller apartment in the rear of a house on Pleasant Street, not far from the old post office. I continued to visit her. We invited her for dinner that year. Jean hardly ate a thing, just picked at the salad, but finished off a whole glass of Scotch. When I asked her, after the meal, if she'd like to take a look at the house, she replied with alacrity, in that sharp parrot's voice,

“I'd love to!”

At age 90 she climbed the stairs without hesitation, went up into the attic and down into the cellar. I showed her everything I could that had remained unchanged since her days. You could see her pleasure, though as a true New Englander, she said nothing. It was one of the things I did in life that gave me great satisfaction. I had a feeling of closing the circle.

Once I invited her to meet my Russian students of English at Temple Emanu-el, built on an old cow pasture where I'd gathered milkweed pods as a kid. She was 92 years old and only slightly deaf. She had not spoken much with non-native

speakers of English since she was a child on the ships. They asked her if she were glad she'd lived so long.

"Well," she replied, "as long as I've got all my marbles."

Puzzled looks among the Russians. Finally one lady asked, "Do you mean that you have lived in *Marblehead* a long time?"

"Yes," said Jean, not understanding the unfamiliar accent. It took me several minutes to sort that one out.

I remember how the curious students asked me questions the next day—they had all recently arrived from the Soviet Union—wondering how a person could live without family, without profession or job, with no visible source of support. Such birds did not inhabit the USSR.

During the next few years, we had annual neighborhood parties during the summer. I always invited Jean, though she hadn't lived in the neighborhood for a quarter of a century. Two of our other neighbors were, like me, children of those who had been Jean's friends. We made much of her, always remembering to provide some *Old Granddad!* I remember her so clearly, sitting in our back yard under the huge pine tree that she (or her gardener) had planted 60 years before, the tree that some years later my brother and I nearly destroyed by climbing on it when it was only a sapling. Jean looked at the sunny yard silently from the pine-scented shade. Some insects buzzed in the bushes. The light played on the black-eyed susans.

"You've kept it very well," she said suddenly, "you've done a nice job."

From Jean, that was the highest possible praise.

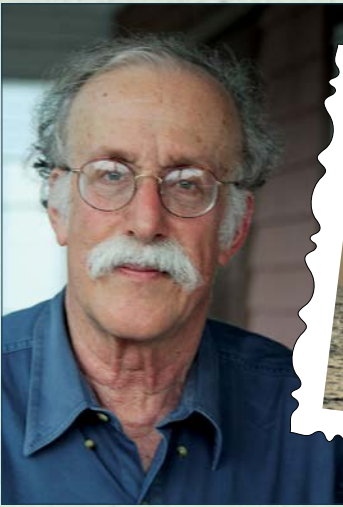
At the age of 99, she finally grew too weak, too deaf, to live on her own anymore. The church folk, who had taken turns looking in on her for many years, (she kept singing in the choir till age 96), persuaded her to go into an assisted living facility down in Plymouth. She got her own room still decorated with the ever-shrinking number of little objects that had followed her all her life, still with the oil painting of her father

as a young man. We went to visit her once with a neighbor, but it was sad. She could hardly hear. She was a century old and had outlived her whole generation. I brought her a bottle of *Old Granddad* which she swiftly tucked into a desk drawer, easy to reach. She still spoke clearly, advised us not to give up our houses, no matter what. She regretted moving to an apartment more than anything else. Her gray hair hung thickly down to her stooped old shoulders. When I helped her up from the chair and down the corridor, I felt how frail and thin she'd become, light as that bird who'd flown through life untouched, on gossamer wings.

POSTSCRIPT:

Jean died on May 4, 2007 at the age of 106. I went to the memorial service at the Clifton Lutheran Church. I'll never forget her, a most indelible part of my childhood and life.

2003



Robert S. Newman

Bob Newman grew up in Marblehead in an era when the town still contained woods, open fields, and even some small farms. After graduating from Marblehead High School in the class of 1960, he attended Cornell University, then joined the Peace Corps, serving in India. He went on to have an interesting life, if not particularly distinguished, teaching university in Australia and a number of other countries, returning to Marblehead after many years overseas. He lives with his wife, Sudha, in the house where he grew up. This volume contains a number of autobiographical stories of his adventures and tales of people he met. He has not failed to include a few observations about life as well.



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