

Peaches

Connie Sowa Wachala¹

This story is a tribute to my mother and her friends, all of whom lived in East Chicago. They were the generation who grew up during the Depression, came of age during World War II, and are now leaving us--but not before etching their lively sense of humor, their spunk, and their energy in our memories.

What can you say about someone whose best friends were named Zip and Ducky? “She had a damned good time in her life,” that’s what you can say even if she stayed single and childless, and sometimes played life a bit too cautiously. You might guess by now that I’m talking about myself—Ellen P. Stanczak, Ellie for short, and you’d be right.

It’s true I never married, although I had my chances. There was Albert early on. He was a sweetheart of a man. I can still hear his deep, cheerful voice when he’d come to pick me up for a date: “Ellie, what a beauty you are,” he’d say. I’d grin and float out the door on his arm. When I got the word that Al died at Iwo Jima, I felt that God had turned against me. Took me two full years before I could pray again.

Later, there was Norman, but I couldn’t deal with his adult children—“Daddy, I need this,” and “Daddy, I need that,” until he seemed just an open wallet floating wads of hundred dollar bills to them every time they had an itch to buy something. He was a nice enough fellow, but how could I respect him if he didn’t respect himself?

I’ve always been the thrifty, practical type. Took pride in it. I still re-use plastic bread bags to pack lunches or store leftovers. My job, too, was steady and secure, but nothing to brag about. I worked as a secretary to the principal at East Chicago High School for thirty-two years, before retiring with a gold watch and a tendency to get migraines. I’m glad to say, though, that my life wasn’t all shielding Mr. Nadowski from angry parents and students and going to parties alone—thanks to a fine group of ladies who called themselves the GNC.

For a long time, we called ourselves the Gay Nine Club, that is until the word “gay” came to mean something other than having a good time. We didn’t protest, the way people do

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nowadays, that a perfectly good word was snatched from us as though it were a wallet. Didn't picket. Didn't demonstrate. We just shortened it to the GNC and went on our merry way.

Oh, what a feisty group we were. Back then Club was every first and third Thursday of the month. We got together to play cards and dice and just let off steam. We laughed about everything—husbands, kids when they came along, bosses and co-workers—but mostly we laughed at ourselves. Always dressed to the hilt, we wore suits or dresses, heels, earrings, bangle bracelets, perfume. So what if Club was held in our own houses? It was our night out, and we made the most of it.

We'd been together for fifty years, since the Second World War when the men were in the service and most of us gals worked in the mills and foundries, spending whatever free time we had writing letters overseas and praying for the safety of our men and for victory. My job at Inland Steel was a doozy. Never worked so hard in my life. I worked straight nights as a hooker. Now don't go jumping to conclusions; it's not what you think. My job was to secure giant hooks onto large vats of molten steel, then give a "thumbs up" to the crane operator, who hauled it up and away. Didn't see the sun for two years, sleeping all day, coming out at night like a mole to go to work. I've got a picture of me from that time, shows exactly how I felt—white as a ghost, bags under my eyes, my hair a bundle of wild curls. I was twenty, but I looked older than my Ma. Anyway, us ladies got together and decided we needed a cheap way to have fun, so why not start a Club night? I admit over the years we've had our spats, our feuds, and our cliques, but back then, you see, people stuck together.

The Club gave me the opportunity to see things I never would have otherwise. The best part was our once-a-year Christmas bash. Each Club night we threw in a dollar, later upped to two - half went towards the prize that night and half went into a savings account, which Lu deposited at Peoples Bank where she worked. At the end of the year, we had enough money to pay for a train ride to Chicago, dinner, and a stage show. "Mame," "South Pacific," "My Fair Lady," we saw them all. I'll never forget the year we saw "Oliver" at the Shubert. The sets! The songs! The drama! I cried my poor, bloodshot eyes out.

I remember one year, must have been in the late Seventies, we took the South Shore train to the Loop and had dinner at the Blackhawk Restaurant. Then we split up and took two taxies to Rush Street. On the way up Michigan Avenue, we saw a man standing at the curb with, of all things, a mattress—why is anyone's guess. Before any of us could bat an eye, Ducky rolled down the window and yelled, "Whadaya charge?" We all cackled, but our cab driver looked surprised. He drove the rest of the way with his nose wrinkled up like he just got a whiff of something bad, with all of us giggling in the back seat.

Ducky didn't have a shy bone in her body. That personality of hers helped her deal with voters in her precinct. She was a Democrat precinct committeewoman, and people would come to her with their problems if they needed an extra garbage pick-up or tree roots routed out from their sewer. They'd get there all upset, but she'd have them laughing in no time. She also worked at Wozniak's flower shop. When the gals in the Club got married, and then when their daughters did, it was always Ducky who made the door prizes for the showers and the floral centerpieces

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for the weddings. Every year on our evening out, she made corsages for all nine of us--red carnations with a sprig of holly, smashed underneath our winter coats.

That night when we got to Rush Street, we walked a while just watching the crowds surging past us - all kinds of people, going all kinds of places. It always felt good to be in the thick of it. After a while, we came to a small, friendly-looking neighborhood bar—the kind you'd see on any street corner in East Chicago, except it had one fancy ornament, a neon hot air balloon, suspended over a splintered wooden door. Huge iron hinges creaked when the door swung out to let two respectable-looking, middle-aged men exit. I don't even remember its name, but it looked inviting, so the nine of us decided to pile in out of the cold, with Zip and Lu leading the way.

You could say Zip and Lu were our leaders. I tell you, they could be bitches when they put their minds to it. They were the two businesswomen in the group, and they were used to having their way.

Lu is retired now. Back in her heyday, she was head teller at Peoples Bank. She always had a head for figures, but she had to drop out of school to find a job when she was sixteen to help her family during the Depression. She was the Club reactionary—the one who wished the Mass was still in Latin, that gays were still in the closet, and that men still wore white shirts. She hated Communists, women's libbers, draft dodgers, and Hippies. She once hired a contractor to re-roof their house, and when the crew showed up the next morning, she refused to let them start working because one of them had a beard. "No Beatnik's working on my property," she said and sent him home.

Zip was just as bossy, but a little more flexible. She catered weddings. I waitressed for her, so I knew firsthand about all the heavy lifting of filled pots and pans that was involved, not to mention the headache of serving food at the right temperature to hundreds of people. Believe me, Zip deserved all the money she made, and she made quite a bit.

But like I say, Lu and Zip could bitch up a storm, especially when they had to play Bunco. Most of us were pinochle players, but two of the gals—Mary Matlock and Estelle—couldn't seem to master that game, so they played dice and the rest of us took turns playing at their table to make it a Bunco foursome.

Mary was kind of ditsy, so it wasn't surprising that she couldn't learn pinochle. Sometimes in the middle of Bunco, she'd forget we were on twosies and mark points for herself when she threw threes. Finally, we had to give the scoresheet to somebody else to keep it fair. Not that she did it on purpose. Mary Matlock worked as a receptionist at St. Stanislaus Church, and she would no sooner think of cheating anybody than she would think of jumping off the Indianapolis Boulevard bridge, but her mind works different from, say, yours or mine. It isn't exactly that she's forgetful. It's just that her thoughts jump from one thing to another like a pinball, and you never know which one she'll land on next. For example, we'd be talking about a new recipe I found for peach crisp, and twenty minutes and a hundred subjects later, Mary would finish her throw of the dice, glide them across the card table to the next person, and say in her

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offhand way, “Shorty don’t like peaches.” The games at both tables would stop, everyone looking at Mary wondering what the heck she’s talking about.

“What?” said Ducky.

“Shorty don’t like peaches,” repeated Mary with a shrug, and Zip said, “We’re talking about Estelle’s hysterectomy, Mary. What in Sam Hill does that have to do with your husband’s taste in fruit?”

“Well,” Mary Matlock screeched. Mary always screeched. Her voice sounded like she had sand in her throat. “A little earlier Ellie was giving out her recipe for peach crisp, and I just remembered that Shorty don’t like peaches,” Mary said, her feathers ruffled a little, and we all roar. All through that evening when the conversation slowed or the room got quiet, one of us would say, “Shorty don’t like peaches,” and the room was up for grabs once more until even Mary thought it was funny and blushed, proud that she is the star of the evening.

So like I said, Mary Matlock and Estelle played Bunco, and the rest of us took turns. I never minded, but some of the girls caused a fuss, especially Zip and Lu.

Estelle, now, was another story. She was a Nervous Nellie, so you know she’d let their fussing get her all flustered, even though Lu was her older sister. Estelle was the youngest of the three Sobota sisters and the last Club member to join, being too young to be a part of it when it started. Couldn’t wait to turn eighteen, she couldn’t. Soon as she did, she started smoking and insisted on being included. We finally agreed to increase our number to nine, which allowed the hostess to sit out the game and tend to hostessing unless, of course, someone was sick, and she was needed to play a hand.

Everything bothered Estelle. If you ever stood in a public restroom with her and watched her wash her hands, you’d know immediately that she had a problem. It wasn’t that she was just careful about clean hands. No, she was more what people would call obsessed. She washed and washed, and when she tore a paper towel off the holder to dry them, she had to wash them again. You see, Estelle was afraid of germs. When she cooked dinner for her family, every fork, every spoon, every knife, every cutting board and plate she used had to be washed and rewashed, and she wore a shower cap so her hair wouldn’t fall into the mashed potatoes or the meatloaf. I tell you, she drove us crazy. Every time we handed her a beer glass from our cupboards, she inspected it, would find a smudge, and ask for another glass. It drove whoever was hosting Club night out of her mind. Especially Ducky, who never was known for neatness and was sent back to the kitchen so many times she finally refused, and Estelle would just drink her beer from the can. Now, you take me—I always drink beer out of a can. Fact is, I can’t stand flat beer and most people, when they give you a beer glass, they’ve given you a glass they’ve used for milk, juice, Coke, or whatever. Milk is just about the worst. If you use a glass for milk, even just one time, you’ll never get a head on a beer in that glass.

But then, I’m getting off the subject. Lu started the Club with her sister, Lottie, and their friend Helen. Helen was as close to the Sobota family as a person can get without sharing blood. The two families lived across the street from each other, and Helen and Lottie were in the same

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class at St. Stanislaus. It's funny they were so close because they couldn't have been more opposite. Helen was a spitfire with her red hair and her loud, crazy laugh. Let me tell you, she was sharp, always ready with a joke. Lottie was a beauty—dark hair, fair skin. She was quiet, the type of person who laughed through her teeth so she wouldn't call attention to herself. She and Mary Matlock were the only two non-smokers in the group. Lottie drank, but never more than a beer or two. She was the only Club member who drove. Most of us lived on the South Side within a few blocks of each other and so we walked to Club, but those who weren't close enough to walk were picked up and driven by Lottie.

She was more religious than the rest of us. She not only went to Sunday Mass, she'd make the novenas on Fridays and go to confession every month. When they were in the sixth grade, Helen talked her into seeing a Shirley Temple movie on a Sunday afternoon instead of going to Lenten vespers. Sister Cleophane punished them both the next day by making them kneel on rosary beads in the school hall, and she warned Lottie to stay away from Helen. "She's from the devil," Sister told her. We all laughed about that for years, but when God finally took the good Sister—she was about one-hundred-and-two years old—Helen was the only one of us who didn't go the funeral. Said she'd meet Sister in Hell some day, so she didn't need to say her good-byes just yet.

At the Rush Street bar that Christmas, we all followed Zip and Lu wending their way through tables of people to an empty table at the back of the room. It turned out to be too small, so Lu and Ducky pushed another table up against it, and we took off our hats, all except Mary, who had on her mink pillbox, which she never liked to remove in public places. It took us a minute getting settled, taking off our coats, gloves, plumping up our corsages, getting out cigarettes and lighters from purses and laying them on the table, all of us talking and joking, except for Jenny, who was a bit of a crab. It didn't help that she was sitting next to Mary Matlock. Jenny's hate for Mary ran so deep that she hadn't spoken a word to the poor girl in ten years. No one knew why, and after a full decade, probably not even Jenny did. I suppose by then it was just her habit to be rude. When Jenny had Club—she lived on the third floor of an apartment building just a block away from Four Corners, that's the main intersection downtown—she took drink orders from everyone except Mary Matlock. "Hey, Jenny! Mary wants a Coke," Helen or whoever was playing partners with Mary that night might yell above the chatter, the laughter, the clanking of dice. Jenny would bring Mary's Coke, hand it to Helen, and hurry away to look for extra ashtrays. Helen would hand the glass across the table to a grateful Mary, who never seemed to be upset at Jenny's slights. It was just one more detail, like the cigarette smoke hanging over us or Ducky's off-color jokes, that made Club night, Club night.

I brought up Jenny's behavior late one night when both of them had gone. "Shit, Ellie, why bring up old hurts?" said Ducky, whose foul mouth made her seem, well, uncouth, but who never failed to defend a friend.

"Jenny still isn't talking to Mary," I said, standing my ground. "So it might be an old hurt, but it's happening now." Anyway, that got us to talking. Someone thought it started because long ago Mary made a remark about Jenny's daughter, Cookie, who got knocked up when she was eighteen and ended up having a shotgun wedding. I suppose that could have been the reason, but Mary—who barely measured five feet if she stood on her toes and had the large,

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wide eyes of a kitten—was so easygoing it was hard to picture her being cruel to anyone or anything. Someone else remembered that Cookie and Mary’s daughter, Charlene, had been close friends all through high school, but had a falling out around graduation. Maybe Jenny just couldn’t forgive that. Charlene had gone on to college and became a third grade teacher. Cookie had her baby and, then, a few years later her husband left her. That’s when things got really tough. She took a job at the five-and-dime, and Jenny helped her by babysitting. Nobody knew for sure if that was it or not. Like I said, probably not even Jenny.

While Jenny snubbed Mary sitting at her elbow, the waiter—a tall, good-looking kid, reminded me of Eleanor Kaczka’s youngest boy. Everyone knows Eleanor, a Lukowski from home. Smitty’s sister. Married Ted Kaczka from the Harbor. Well, this young man asked to take our orders. We asked for fancy drinks—Manhattans for Helen and Lu, martinis for Ducky and Zip, Tom Collins, sloe gin fizzes, vodka and tonics for everyone else. Ducky, her short, pudgy fingers flicking the ash of her cigarette into the ashtray, said with a nod as the waiter walked away, “My type.” She winked across the table.

“They’re all your type, Ducky,” snapped Zip in her flat, no-nonsense voice, and we all laughed. When the drinks came, we toasted the GNC and sat back, taking everything in. There was a long bar, crowded, at the back of the room, and at the far side, an empty dance floor.

“That’s strange,” said Jenny in her usual gruff way, breaking into our conversation, which ranged from worrying about the Iranian hostage crisis—those poor people being held against their will for months--to gossiping about Eleanor Kaczka.

“What’s so strange,” called Zip over everyone else’s voice.

“We’re the only women in here,” Jenny said.

All of us stopped talking in mid-sentence. We looked at each other and, then, looked around.

“I don’t think that’s so unusual,” said Mary Matlock, looking very proper in her mink hat.

“It *is* strange,” Jenny insisted, sounding annoyed with Mary yet determined to ignore her.

“Mary’s right,” said Helen. “That’s not so unusual.”

Everyone was silent while we stared at the guys jammed shoulder to shoulder at the bar.

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing that’s unusual,” I said.

“What’s that?” everyone wanted to know.

“Usually one or two men will make it their business to find out what we’re celebrating,” I said, fluffing up my corsage, “and no one here has made a move toward us, let alone paid us the compliment of a second look.”

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After a minute, Zip said, "Ellie's right."

It was right then that Estelle took a deep breath and hissed, "Oh, my God!"

Everyone turned toward her and waited. Knowing Estelle, it could have been anything from a movie star in the crowd to a wad of gum that her hand happened to bump against under the table.

"What is it?" said Lu, who never could hide her irritation with her sister.

"Don't look. Don't look," Estelle whispered, almost in tears. We all sat still, wondering what got her flustered this time. "Two guys at the next table are holding hands," she said, her lips twitching.

"Goddamnit," said Ducky, slapping the table with her hand. "Wouldn't you know it? We've gone and plunked ourselves down in a gay bar!"

Now can't you just see us? A bunch of ladies looking around the room curious as heck, except for Estelle, who wants to leave in the worst way. "Let's go," she whines.

"Now, wait a minute," said Zip. "We've just paid Rush-Street prices for these Rush-Street drinks, and I, for one, am not leaving until I'm ready."

Estelle started to shake.

"Calm down, Stel," said Helen, patting her arm.

"It's a sin to stay here," Estelle said through clenched teeth. "First Friday confessions aren't for three weeks. I'll have to call Father Tomaszewski and make a private—" The music from the juke box changed just then from a Sinatra ballad to a snappy pop tune, and the crowd livened up. Some of the guys moved from the bar to the dance floor.

"Let's go," said Zip.

"Home?" said Estelle, relieved.

"To dance," said Zip, nodding at Mary Matlock and Helen, the two Club members who most love to dance. They stood up and followed her to the floor. I never could pass up a chance to dance either, and when I got up, Lottie and Ducky joined in, too. Lu stayed put with Jenny and, of course, Estelle, who stared at us, sure that our souls are farther on the road to damnation with every snap of our fingers and sway of our hips.

We're dancing in a circle facing each other, and before you know it, two young men, who have been smiling and maybe even laughing at us since we got on the dance floor, have joined

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the circle too. “Hey, mom, where’d you learn to dance like that?” says one young fella, red haired, face as sweet as pie, who reminds me of my nephew Stanley.

“Our generation invented dancing, don’tcha know,” said Zip, grabbing Mary Matlock’s hand and leading her in a fancy swing step. More men join our circle, clapping their hands as Zip and Mary twirl. Before long Jenny and Lu join us. and the music turns Latin, then we’re doing a conga line with the young men behind us, just like in the movie *My Sister Eileen*, when Janet Leigh leads a line of dancing Brazilian sailors to her apartment and her amazed sister. Mary Matlock is at the head of the line, zigzagging through the tables, tapping the holdouts on the shoulder and motioning them to join. Some do, but most of them give her dirty looks and turn away. Estelle, horrified that she’s left alone at the table, gets up to join, cutting in front of me. “You’d rather be dancing in hell with us than watching all alone in heaven, hey, Stel?” I says with a wink.

She says something back, but all I can hear is “confession tomorrow,” as she kicks up her heels.

When the music ends, everyone claps.

Zip turns, stretches out her arms like a movie star to her fans, and says, “Thank you, gentlemen, for a wonderful time,” and we let her lead us back to the table where we catch our breaths, finish our drinks, and gather our belongings to leave. Before we do, I take one more look at the boy who looks like my nephew Stanley. He’s at the bar talking nose to nose with another handsome kid, both of them focused on each other as though they are the only two in this loud, crowded place. It’s not often I’m jealous, but I confess it hit me hard that day looking at them, remembering what it’s like to be thrilled by someone. I stand rooted until Jenny pulls me by the arm and shoves me along. “C’mon, Ellie. No sense in pining for handsome young men who aren’t interested.”

I blush. “It’s not that.”

“Of course it’s not.” Jenny shakes her head and laughs at me.

As we spill out the door, Zip asks Estelle, “Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Estelle opens her mouth to argue the point but before she can answer, Lu says, “I still wouldn’t let any of them work on my house.”

Those were the days, when we were younger and sassy as all get-out. When we got older, those trips to Chicago ended, first because we were so busy with our jobs and our families that there was never a day we could all get together, and then because it got too hard for some of us to take the train in and walk the city. As the years went by, Lu suggested we name beneficiaries to get our share of the dues, which she had invested.

Now we’ve ripened, and some of us have even fallen off the tree. Lottie, she was the first one to go. At fifty-seven. Cancer. Even before that, life turned on her. It broke her heart that she never had children. And then her husband, a good-looking man, turned into a heavy drinker and

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took to beating her. Finally, they divorced. All kinds of men tried to take up with her, but she said she was still married in the eyes of God. We all knew she never got over Frank. Ducky died a few years later, after a heart attack.

A lot of us became widows: Mary Matlock's Shorty died in her arms as they were dancing the polka at a wedding reception. Lucy's Leach. Zip's Stanley. Jenny's Tiny.

Some of us still around aren't doing so good. Helen's eyesight gave out, and she is mostly confined to her house. Zip had a stroke and moved in with her son and daughter-in-law. Lu's legs give her trouble; she barely gets around with the help of a walker. Estelle's health has held up, but she's as nervous as ever. Her husband still coddles her, but he gets away for golf weekends with the guys whenever he can.

Mary Matlock is so hunched over from that bone disease that she walks facing the floor. Her daughter visits her each morning to help her get dressed, but she hasn't let the pain or her shrunken body get her down. She's cheerful, dresses to kill, and swears she'd still be dancing except that she no longer has a partner.

Jenny is as crabby as ever. She visits me here and complains about everything from our pastor squandering the church's money to her daughter and son-in-law taking too many vacations and not visiting her enough. In her old age, Jenny has learned to drive, and each Sunday she picks up Mary Matlock and drives her the few blocks to the church for Mass, but she still doesn't say much to her, and they sit in separate pews.

Jenny is good enough to visit me here every Friday as regular as clockwork, but I don't get to see the others much. This place is nice enough, but it does get to me sometimes, what with the TV blaring and people snoring in their chairs. Once in a while, they get a pinochle game going, and I join it every now and then, but it's not like the games we used to have on Club night. Last Christmas they had the local high school jazz band come and play for us, and that was nice, but it sure couldn't compare to the music we'd hear on our nights on the town.

People ask me if I regret never getting married, and the question always makes me pause. It would be nice to have a family—a husband, a son, a daughter—but then, in all those years after Albert died, I never did find someone I cared for enough to marry. It wouldn't have been worth it if I wasn't in love, would it? Whenever it gets me down, I just remember that I've lived my life to the hilt. I've laughed, cried, joked, argued, danced, drank my beer, was moved to tears more than once by a great performance or a moving song, and I--Ellen P. Stanczak, Ellie for short—once danced in a Conga line in a gay bar.