

# **silent spaces**

sandy lee carlson

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*For Uncle Bud,  
Whose long life is a celebration  
Of all that is here and now.*

*To my mother, who is beautiful.*

*“TONY THE barber tells me he’s going to Vermont this weekend to enjoy the fall foliage—but why go to Vermont when it’s all right here?”*

*Uncle Bud*

I SUPPOSE you could say Uncle Laurence has never left Uncle Bud since the War. His picture has stayed atop my uncle's bureau ever since the end of it. His smile in that picture matches the brilliance of the sun's light reflected from his Navy whites as he stands under his parents' grape arbor in the backyard of their home in Darien, Connecticut. His Navy cap is pushed back, and the angle at which it rests accentuates Laurence's slender young face.

Uncle Bud, who is twelve years older than Laurence, takes the picture around 1943. Appreciating Laurence's smile takes knowing the kind of photographer Uncle Bud is. He is scientific; he appreciates the logic guiding his art. He has the light meter reading exactly what it should for the right exposure from the right distance at the right f-stop. All of this is mechanical at this time, and it takes a minute to get it exactly right. Laurence is a good sport, and he smiles fully and beautifully at Uncle Bud.

This photo is one of a series. There are albums full of Laurence under the grapes with his mother, his father, his mother and father, his siblings. They are beautiful summer photos of a young sailor happy at home before his last tour of duty in the Pacific.

I have known Uncle Bud's photos all my life. My Gram, his younger sister Marjorie, keeps the pictures of her younger brother in an album on the end table of the family home in Darien for as long as anyone can remember. I look at these albums whenever we visit Gram and Grampa, which is not often enough, and wonder about this uncle with the beautiful face who dies in combat twenty-two years before I am born.

I have come to know Laurence in the bits and pieces older folks break off like food that is strange and new to children, and they are unsure what they can handle. When I am very young, Gram tells me Lau joins the Navy after Pearl Harbor. He volunteers to be a submariner, though he is too young to sign up on his own. Nobody can say why he joins the branch of the service with the highest rate of enlisted men killed in action. He is ship's cook, third class.

Nan Isbell, mother to Uncle Bud, Gram, Uncle Burt, Uncle Lau, Aunt Dot, and Uncle Gus, signs the papers because her boy says he is

going anyway. That's according to Gram, who also tells me Nan stops playing the violin because her playing has made Laurence, her fourth child, cry. Gram tells me this by way of explaining why their mother signs those papers. Lau learns his boat—the USS Herring—inside out, and he can draw it for his mother when he comes home on leave from the War. This is about all the story I learn from Gram.

One day thirty years after the War, though, Gram finds a Skippy figurine that belongs to him. She washes it up and puts it on my mother's dresser in Mom's old room—Lau's room when he is a kid in the same house, the one Nan designs and Pop Isbell builds in 1914—and I understand from where I stand behind my mother this day in the middle of the 1970s that this Skippy figurine is important because it is Lau's. (Aunt Dot tells me years later, when I ask her who Skippy is, that she has one, too. She never does tell me about Skippy.) Gram finds things like this like magic down the cellar or in cabinets or stuck under dressers. Everything she finds is important, and she finds a place for it. Mom doesn't say much about Skippy, though she eventually brings him to our house and puts him inside her great-grandmother's bookcase, where he is today. Saying much is not her way.

Gram dies when I am fifteen, so what I learn next about Uncle Laurence comes from Mom. Mom is born in 1941, so she doesn't remember him much. She remembers Nan Isbell's looking through a magnifying glass at magazine photos of prisoners of war discovered on Pacific islands in case Laurence is there. This is years after the end of the War and years after the Navy tells her to stop hoping. Here's why.

The Navy tells Nan and Pop that Lau is missing in action because his boat never returns signals to another boat and never arrives at Midway Island, as scheduled, on or about July 3, 1944. The Navy can't find the boat or confirm that it has sunk; therefore, the Herring is lost. When a couple of years go by and the situation remains the same, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal decides he needs to close his file on the Herring and tells Nan and Pop for the purpose of payroll, etc., that Laurence is dead. He is dead for administrative purposes. Nan never quits going through those magazines with a magnifier.

*BECAUSE OF the drought the only lily plant I have surviving is the three-year-old plant which has become a perennial and from which your seeds came.*

*I am not familiar with your stamp album. Mine is the Minkus "All American" and I specialize in US I do have a few odds and ends of postal stationery but have never tried to collect much of it.*

*From the time I was a kid and spent so much time in the woods, I have been interested in observing nature. In a small pond near 17 Park Lane, I used to watch muskrats feed and once found a family who had made their home under an old door. When I lifted the door on the bank of the pond, there was Mama & 3 or 4 babies. I used to trap muskrats, skunk, rabbit, and sold the furs to make spending money while in school.*

*A short time ago, we were having lunch outside at the north end of Lake Waramaug when a monarch butterfly kept flying in near my shoulders and Aunt Ruth said she didn't know I was so sweet. They are beautiful insects and about the longest traveling ones alive. They migrate to and from S. America, I think. Shortly after that I saw a Mourning Cloak feeding on the flowers along our drive. For fun I wanted to see how close I could get to it. Within a couple of minutes I was within two feet and then put out my hand. It kept feeding and I was able to stroke its wings on one side with the back of my fingers. It must have been enjoying the nectar because I have never been able to touch one before.*

*About two weeks ago, I found three beautiful little speckled eggs under a bush. Near the top of the bush I found a wren's nest with one baby in it. The nest had been torn loose and was resting at an angle of 45 degrees. The eggs were very cold and one was cracked. I put the cracked one back in the nest (she rejected it later) and tried to incubate the remaining two in a towel under a light bulb. I kept them at 100 degrees Fahrenheit for a few days but nothing happened. I am sure a cat raided this nest. A raccoon would have wrecked it as they do the robins' nests. At any rate, I am saving the wren nest for Jared to take to school with a nice snake skin I found and mounted for him. The skin is from a garter snake, 25 1/2" long, and complete. I enjoy these things and try to teach Jared so he will respect and appreciate wild things. So much for Mother Nature, as my Mother always referred to her. We leave for the Cape on Sunday and will come home on Sept. 9th.*

*Uncle Bud, August 25, 1981*

*I HOPE you had a perfect weekend at the Cape. Our boys received free passes to the Fair every year which they gave to kids attending Catholic Schools. Then we packed our gear and went to the Cape and fished 2 1/2 days before reluctantly coming home Sunday afternoon. For a few years we were able to get bay scallops after I found a huge bed of them. After that, the natives got jealous and changed the local laws to prevent out-of-staters from taking them. I shucked many a bushel late in the afternoon while Aunt Ruth was cooking dinner for us. I averaged one quart to a bushel in the shell. At that time, we also bought more to freeze and paid \$8.00 per gallon. Now they are \$6.00 per lb. for bays. One year it was so cold we went beach combing for driftwood for the fireplace at night. In the morning, I got up, turned on the 4 gas burners & the oven & started breakfast. We had real good times & it's nice to recall them now.*

*Uncle Bud, October 15, 1981*

*This Is Our Family*

I

Birdseed hulls  
Fall onto the orange lily petals  
That bloomed today.

II

My uncle  
Pounds the table to beckon memory.  
Age is a thief.

III

He wills me  
To do the remembering for him.  
I turn away.

IV

The lilies  
Cover the slope outside; the feeder sails  
The orange tide.

V

Many birds  
Dance above the sea I would slip below  
To claim the past—

VI

My uncle's.  
I recall his stories; I give them back.  
He rests, then points:

VII

He has news.  
I will gather his gestures like flowers,  
A great bouquet

VIII

Of his life.  
He will make a social bird of me

On this island.

IX

What is it?

His nurse had her twenty-first birthday.

He was there.

X

Every day

I gather his dreams like twigs and dry leaves

Into a nest.

*Sea Shells*

He chooses them specially:

A brown paper lunch bag full of Cape Cod sea shells  
From years ago: sea-bleached, sun-brightened, and  
Iridescent as pearls fit for a bride's neck.

He chooses them for the blind boy  
Whose mother works at his nursing home.  
The boy is a Volunteer Visitor, though infrequent.

He puts some into my hand  
As if they are spun glass or golden eggs;  
I put them in my lap until I am a coral reef.

He chooses the spiraling peaks of the conch,  
The fanning ribs of the peach pale scallop,  
The rock-heavy clam, the flat ear of the oyster.

How many times have I  
Searched the beaches of the Cape and Connecticut  
For these? I do not have my uncle's luck of the hunt,  
Never know quite where to look.

I close my eyes and finger the turns and grooves,  
Finding for myself the dark sea  
That will tumble out of a lunch bag.