

Fall 12-1-2004

## How You Hoped to be Remembered

Cynthia Jele  
*College of DuPage*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Jele, Cynthia (2004) "How You Hoped to be Remembered," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 25 : No. 1 , Article 79.  
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol25/iss1/79>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Prairie Light Review by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact [koteles@cod.edu](mailto:koteles@cod.edu).

# How You Hoped to be Remembered

Cynthia Jele

You're an illegal immigrant and work as a live-in nanny for a wealthy suburban family. The Halters, whom you found in the Help Wanted section of the local newspaper, have two children- Sara aged 5 and a two-year-old boy named Dylan. Sara displays behavior typical for that age-she is moody and throws violent temper tantrums. She is manipulative and often gets away with everything. Dylan is a sweet, happy toddler who always has a smile on his plump face. The children's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Halter, whom you simply cannot call by their first names, Tom and Kelly, despite their insistence, are a pleasant couple with a busy work schedule.

The Halters live in a large six bedroom, five bath house, complete with three car garages. Your bedroom in the basement is enormous and furnished with all amenities-a cushy queen-sized bed, a larger-than-life walk-in closet, a television and a VCR set. You have a private bath too. The living arrangement is a far cry from the modest shack you call home back in your country, and which your husband and children share with your in-laws and other family members.

The Halter children have their own expensively furnished rooms. Seeing this makes your heart ache: your two little girls back home have to share a small bedroom and a bunk bed with their two cousins.

You are 30 years old. You came in this country in a desperate attempt to provide for your family. You're a qualified teacher in your country. You remember the day you received the teacher's diploma, what a happy day that was. You will find a job and support your family, you thought. No more living in poverty, no more living in squalor conditions. You're a teacher now, you told yourself. For three years you searched for a job, a teaching post at first. Nothing. The education department had a hiring freeze on all teaching posts, you were told. You waited patiently, but the freeze was never lifted. Dejected but hopeful, you set out to look for another job, any position. For three years nothing came through; too many qualified persons, not enough opportunities. You had no alternative but to look someplace else.

You, however, cannot teach here, they tell you. Your education is not good enough for this country. Your qualifications are irrelevant to them. Here you are an uneducated, undocumented nobody. You're despondent and almost broke when you find the Halters. They like you from the beginning. Your maturity makes you a perfect fit for them, they say. Plus, they're interested in your story: life at home, hungry children, unemployed spouse, and sickly in-laws. They sympathize. Mrs. Halter even gets teary and says, "Oh, honey. What a terrible thing that is happening in your country. A very bad thing."

\*\*\*\*\*

You've been with the Halters for over two years now, twenty six months to be exact. You intend to make this your last year with them. Your husband, now self-employed, thanks to the money you've been sending home each month, tells you he's saving most of it so you can finally open the restaurant when you return. The new house is almost done, he'll be moving there with the children very soon, he says. Your children are the one keeping you sane. You draw your strength from listening to their eager and happy voices on the phone or by looking at their pictures. They've grown. It breaks your heart that you haven't seen them the entire time here-you don't have the right traveling documents.

You've made a few friends with other live-in nannies here. They, like you, come from all over the world: Bulgaria, Lithuania, Mexico and Poland, and each has a story, mostly sad, to tell. You meet at the park where you take the children. You bring baskets, share the contents, and reminisce about home. You also gossip endlessly about the rich and vain employers: who is divorcing, who is pregnant, who is having an affair and who has the most money. You daydream about having that much money and discuss what you'll do with it. You laugh yourselves silly afterwards. You spend your days off, half-a-Saturday and a full Sunday, in your room reading. You've taken to Maya Angelou's inspirational books. You also frequent the \$2 movie theater and the Chinese buffet two blocks from your house. You like the sweet chicken with beef fried rice. You've never eaten Chinese food before. Sometimes you and your friends go to the city where you visit the museums, picnic by the lake, or visit the ethnic neighborhoods.

You work 50 hours a week. You cook, bathe, drive, and entertain the children. You also clean the house, wash, iron, and mend ripped clothes. In the summer, everybody's favorite time of the year, you take the children to the neighborhood pool everyday for a few hours. They like it there. You watch Dylan waddles and splashes in the shallow end, his blue water goggles tightly clad on his face. Sara likes the water slide. Now that she is able to go down on her own, she climbs the fifty steps and slides down unassisted. She does this the entire time you're there: she never tires of going up those stairs.

\*\*\*\*\*

On this particular afternoon, you're at pool with the children. After having chosen the best spot under the umbrella shade, you unpack the beach bag and put their goggles on. You realize that you left the sunscreen lotion in the car; Dylan was playing with the tube on your way to the pool. It is hot, above 100, the children need sunscreen lotion. You tell Sara to watch her little brother while you run to the car to get it. You instruct her firmly not to go near the water until you come back.

You've just closed the car door, lotion in one hand, when suddenly loud screams and lifeguards' whistles blare from the pool. It can't be a signal for a break already, you think, something has happened. You run back towards the entrance. You notice immediately that the pool has been cleared and a crowd has gathered by the lifeguard's station. Someone is yelling, "Call the ambulance!" A woman's voice is frantically shouting, "Whose child is this? Who's responsible for this child?" You look for Sara and Dylan but they are not in the chairs under the umbrella where you left them.

You start to panic, your heartbeat increases, and tears start to form around your eyes. Where are they? Please, God don't let it be them. Whatever is happening over there, don't let it be them. You move closer to the crowd, pushing your way through. Now the teenage boy lifeguard asks, "Who's with this child?"

You hear murmurs around the crowd; somebody is saying, "I can't believe someone would leave children alone like this?"

Another agrees, "So irresponsible!"

Yet another chip in, "What kind of a parent would leave a child unattended at the pool?"

The first thing you notice is Dylan's Spiderman's trunks, the one you bought just yesterday at K-mart. He is wailing in the lifeguard's shoulders.

He's with me, you say and suddenly everyone turns to face you. Sara hears you voice, "Martha, Martha!" she screams, as she searches for you. You see her and kneel on the concrete with your arms wide open. She throws herself into them and starts to apologize profusely for not watching Dylan.

It's not your fault, you say. Everything is all right. Everything is okay.

Just then, Dylan sees you; he stops crying abruptly. He wiggles out of the lifeguard's arms straight into yours. He is smiling and says, "Martha, me under water. Me under water." The lifeguard starts to say something, asking questions or explaining what happened, but you can't tell. You don't hear anything except the children's heartbeats thumping gently as you hold them. You close your eyes and mutter, Thank God, Thank God. The blowing whistles jostle you out of your prayer. Everyone heads back into the water. Children laughter and water splashes everywhere. The pool's order is restored.

The paramedics arrive shortly and check on the boy.

"He'll be fine," they say, "make sure he stays warm. You're lucky ma'am the guards saw the child before he was on the deep end, otherwise it could have been a fatal accident. Children this young almost never make it if they drown." Before they leave, they congratulate the staff for doing an excellent job.

The police are next to arrive. Except for a few caucusing parents angrily jabbing in your direction, the pool shows no sign of an earlier disturbance.

"Ma'am, I'm Sergeant Smith", a tall blond officer introduces himself. "Are you these children's childcare provider?" He asks, not bothering with the pretense that you could be more than a nanny to them.

Yes, you reply rather sheepishly. There is something about this sergeant that makes you feel uncomfortable.

"What is your name and address, ma'am?" He asks pulling out a small notebook. You give this information; he scribbles it down quickly.

"Can you explain to me what happened here today?"

You explain how you left the sunscreen lotion in the car. How you made sure the children were safely far away from the pool while you went to get it. How you heard screams and whistles coming from the pool as you made your way back. How you found the children missing from under the umbrella where you left them. How you pushed your way through the crowd and found the lifeguard holding Dylan, the young one. You don't know anymore, you say politely.

He writes all this down, his pens moves furiously through the page.

"Ma'am, where are the children's parents? Have you contacted them?" He asks.

Yes, I've called but they didn't answer. I left a message for them to call me back as soon as they can. They are in Florida and are not due until tomorrow, you tell the sergeant.

He looks at you and sighs a little.

"Ma'am, I'm afraid I can't leave you alone with the children. Is there anybody else, a relative or close family friend that can take care of the children?"

This cannot be true you think, you've been a good nanny to these children, how can this sergeant treat you like an irresponsible person.

Sir, I've been a good child care provider to the children. What happened today was an honest mistake. Please don't take away the children; they've been through enough already. You plead with him. He only shakes his head.

"I'm sorry ma'am but the law does not take kindly to child neglect cases. I don't make the

law, I merely follow it. After the children are taken care of, I'm afraid I have to take you with me. I'm sorry ma'am but I have no choice. Now is there anyone you can call to pick them up?"

He asks again with annoyance in his voice. You realize that he's ready to make the arrest. He probably has been waiting for a moment like this for some time now. Now that it is here, he's ready to make his move.

Tears are now flowing out of your eyes uncontrollably. Sara and Dylan start to cry too.

It's okay, don't cry. Everything is okay. You whisper to them.

You call the children's grandmother, Nana, who lives only a few miles from the Halters house. She picks up on the third ring. You explain quickly the situation, though you can barely make what you're saying yourself. She does not comprehend a word you're saying but understands that something has happened and you're asking her to come to the pool, the subdivision pool.

With the children still clutched on both your arms, you move to pick up the rest of your stuff. The sergeant follows. He offers to help carry the pool bag and the children's shoes. You can barely see where you're going; your eyes are blinded by the tears. Sara, aware of your temporary blindness, wriggles out of your arm to her feet. She holds your hand and guides you towards the car.

It seems like ages before the children's Nana arrives.

"Oh my God, Martha! What happened? Are you okay?" She jumps out of the car, leaving it straddled between two parking spots, and runs towards you and the children. Dylan shouts with delight "Nana, Nana", and extend his arms towards her. Sara tightens her grip around your hand.

For a minute you all stand embraced in a big group hug. The sergeant clears his throat, and breaks the hug. Nana turns towards him. He explains what happened.

"You can't take her away. It was an honest mistake, the children are fine. She's been very good with them. I'm sure whatever happened there was a simply an accident that could have happened to anyone, yourself included."

Your sobs soften for a minute. An ounce of courage returns to you, Nana is here, everything will be fine you tell yourself. Sergeant Smith maintains that child negligence is a serious offense, "Only yesterday," he continues, "we had to take a mother who left her children in the car while she did her shopping. She left the children in that car for the whole hour! In that heat!" He states this as a matter of fact.

"That's different from the situation today," Nana interjects before he can continue.

"Martha did not spend an hour in the car. You cannot equate her situation with that story of yours, it's absurd." She is starting to get angry; the sergeant is unbending though.

"It's the law ma'am, there's nothing I can do. It's beyond my control." He maintains.

"We'll sort this out Martha. Don't worry; we'll take care of this mess. God, I'm so sorry this is happening to you."

At this moment you realize that you're going to jail, that nothing Nana says will save you from spending a night or more behind bars. You've never been to jail before. You've heard stories and seen movies of what happens in those places. The thought and realization brings a new wave of tears. You begin to cry unintelligibly.

"Oh honey, oh poor child." Nana hugs you.

The sergeant speaks to you, "Don't worry ma'am. We'll take of you. The place is not bad at all; it's only a short stay detention center, certainly no murderers there."

You look up and see that it is a different sergeant speaking. Where did he come from? Has he been there the whole time?

"You'll have to leave the car here. You can get it tomorrow, after the children's parents return." He says sympathetically.

Okay, you respond, somehow feeling a little eased by the sergeant's words.

You give Nana the keys to the house and the minivan. Before she takes the children to her car, you

hug, kiss and tell them you'll see them tomorrow, that Nana will take care of them today because you have to go with the police to the station. Nana promises to sort the mess as soon as she gets home. She will talk to her attorney. They will get you out of there before the day is over. You watch them drive off, Sara waves at you until the car is out of sight. The sergeant, the sympathetic one, opens the back door of the car for you. They don't handcuff you, and you're grateful.

\*\*\*\*\*

At the police department, they take down your information again, finger prints, picture, and your wallet. The department shows no sign of action-no drunkards resisting fingerprinting or prostitutes flirting with officers.

A female officer introduces herself as Lieutenant Myers. She leads you down a florescent lit hallway through a dozen of half-empty cells. Most of the occupants are napping; the few that are reading or writing glance in your direction as you follow Officer Myers down to the closest empty cell. She inserts the key, slides the bar-door open and tells you to make yourself comfortable. She has heard your case; she tells you not to worry about a thing. You'll be out of there in no time.

The cell has two narrow beds, low to the ground, each covered with a thin thermal blanket. A small locker separates them. You sit on the one closest to the door. You close your eyes and try to make sense of it all. You retrace your day from the time you woke up, fed the children breakfast right after their parents left for Florida, took them to the park where you watched Dylan go down the slide on his own for the first, played Barbies with Sara while her brother took a nap, packed the pool bag and finally took them to the pool. Everything up to this point is vivid in your mind, what happened afterwards is simply-blur.

Lieutenant Myers' voice announcing the presence of your lawyer startles you. You follow her to a room, the common room, down the corridor. A tall gentleman in his fifties clad in golf gear and showing signs of recent sunburn, greets you warmly. His name is Bernard Griffin. He is a good friend of Mrs. Dayton (Nana). He has gotten the report from the police but needs to hear your account as well.

"There's good and bad news here Martha," he says after listening to what you had to say. "The bad news is that we will not be able to see the judge until Monday. The court is closed on weekends. The good news is, this is a misdemeanor case. Since you have no prior convictions and the Halters will not press charges, the case is likely to be dismissed. If not, you'll be ordered to do community service; nothing major or jail time." He adds that you should not say anymore to anyone without talking to him first. When he's done he touches your shoulder and tells you to hang in there.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Halters come to see you on Saturday, as soon they get in from Florida. Mrs. Halter cries and is apologetic the entire visit. They have spoken to Mr. Griffin and will work with him until you're out of there. The children miss you, Sara is still a little shaken and asks why you're still at the police station.

"How is it in there? Are they treating you right?" Mr. Halter asks with great concern in his voice. His eyes do not meet yours.

So far it is okay, you say. The officers are kind. There's only a dozen or so of us in there. Last night at dinner, I got to meet the other detainees. No one has said why they're here. Another woman, Kathy, was brought in around midnight for DUI. I share the cell with her.

"What about stuff like cosmetics and underwear, should we bring those for you?" Mrs.

Halter asks between sobs.

No, you say. They've provided you with the supplies; soap, toothpaste, toothbrush a cup and spoon, and some clothing.

You spend most of the weekend in your cell or in the common room watching reruns of old shows. You are also allowed an hour outside and another to use the indoor gym, or the small library.

On Monday morning Mr. Griffin is there, the judge will hear your case in two hours. He's brought you a change of clothes and will meet you in court. Before he leaves, you ask him about your status, your illegal status in the country and whether it will have any effect in your case. He hopes not, he says, he certainly hopes it does not come up. But it does.

Mr. Griffin is waiting outside the courthouse when you arrive in the police van; a few of other detainees have a court date. He paces the steps of the courthouse and frantically looks at his watch. Something is wrong, you think He sees the van and quickly moves towards it. He has a worried look on his face. When you get off the van, he walks with you towards the courthouse entrance.

The courthouse is packed with family members there to support the detainees. The Halters are there too. You do not hear most of what goes on during the hearings. When your name is called you jump out of the seat. Mr. Griffin motions you to move forward. The judge, a middle age women with a stern face, reads the police report and ask Mr. Griffin questions. It is hard for you to hear what is being said, your mind is buzzing with thoughts-you're deeply sorry for what happened to Dylan. You shouldn't have left the children by themselves even for a minute. You're sorry to the Halters for causing all the trouble. You're a good person. You're a good mother and wife. And until three days ago have been a good nanny. You look up to this stern looking woman and wonder what she'll do with you.

The judge's voice jostles you, "Miss, are you aware of the charges brought against you?" She asks in a hard voice. Her eyes meet yours; they're piercing but have no malice. Yes, ma'am, you reply. You stomach flutters, you throat tightens. You can feel your tear ducts filling.

The judge explains the seriousness of child neglect and the newly passed laws governing such offenses. After talking for about fifteen minutes, most of which you don't hear-your sobs have completely taken over-she finally sets a date for your next court appearance, in two weeks. A bond of \$1,000 is set.

Mr. Griffin shakes his head and mutters, "I was hoping for a dismissal Martha. We'll have to work with the situation," he says in a resigned voice. Mr. Halter approaches you, they'll pay the bond, he says.

\*\*\*\*\*

But there is a problem with your bond. Since you're not a citizen of this country, you have to hand the authorities your passport; it's a regular procedure, the officer handling your bail explains. You know what this means, so does Mr. Griffin: a new charge and definitely no bail. You heart doesn't beat faster at the thought. Your head doesn't spin. Your eyes don't swell with tears. You look at him and tell him you're ready for whatever happens. He smiles and says you're a brave woman. Very brave indeed.

You spend four weeks at the detention center; the new development, the immigration violation charge, has made your case complex. You're now on the first name with the officers: Dora, Anita, and Luey. Only a day before, Dora bought you a ten dollar phone card. You called your husband and told him you were coming back in two weeks. He was surprised, why so sudden, he asked with concern. Because you miss them so much, you explained, you couldn't bear to be away any

longer. He was happy. He would tell the girls. He would probably throw a party. That would be nice, you said. That would be nice.

But there is a problem with your bond. Since you're not a citizen of this country, you have to hand the authorities your passport; it's a regular procedure, the officer handling your bail explains. You know what this means, so does Mr. Griffin: a new charge and definitely no bail. Your heart doesn't beat faster at the thought. Your head doesn't spin. Your eyes don't swell with tears. You look at him and tell him you're ready for whatever happens. He smiles and says you're a brave woman. Very brave indeed.

You spend four weeks at the detention center; the new development, the immigration violation charge, has made your case complex. You're now on the first name with the officers: Dora, Anita, and Lucy. Only a day before, Dora bought you a ten dollar phone card. You called your husband and told him you were coming back in two weeks. He was surprised, why so sudden, he asked with concern. Because you miss them so much, you explained, you couldn't bear to be away any longer. He was happy. He would tell the girls. He would probably throw a party. That would be nice, you said. That would be nice.

The Halters visit you almost every day. None of your nanny friends have been to see you; however they all send with the Halters your favorite dishes. Maria sends chicken fajitas; Anna, Polish sausage and perogies; and Sandra sends cepelinai. Mrs Halter says they've all come to the house to inquire about you, but are afraid to visit in case they get into trouble too. You understand and ask her to tell them.

You've made peace with all that has happened, God intended for it to end like this, you reason. You're happy now and less burdened by it all. Even your sleep is not disturbed by nightmares. The future doesn't look bad either. Your husband has built your house, and has started a trucking business.

On the day of your hearing a representative from your government is there to observe. He is clearly annoyed by your case. He has seen many cases like yours he says, and he doesn't understand why people go to such extremes to come to this country.

"Our country is not that bad," he says, "people should exercise patience. Jobs will come and everyone will prosper."

You agree with everything he says though inside you're fuming at his ignorance; obviously he doesn't know what it's like to be poor and unemployed. You do not dare argue with him though. You don't want to make him angry, in case he makes things difficult for you.

When you finally make another court appearance, the same stern-faced woman judge resides. Her judgment is expected, 200 hours of community service which you will not serve because you are to leave the country immediately. The government man says he will arrange for your ticket, though he warns you that such things takes a long time, up to two months. The Halters volunteer to buy your ticket; they cannot bear to see you locked up for another two months. You will be able to leave the in few days.

On the day of your departure, you say a teary farewell to the officers and leave for the airport, accompanied by Mr. Griffin. The Halters, with Sara and Dylan, Nana, Sandra, Maria and Anna are there too. You spend the hour before your plane leaves eating and laughing, the memory of your ordeal temporarily forgotten. It is wonderful, you think, this is how you hoped to be remembered.