

Swinging Bridge
by [Debra Shiveley Welch](#)



Pawpaw (Joseph Elmer) Gaffin and me at two years old.
Taken at the head of an old swinging bridge
In Adams County, Ohio

My Journey Begins



Following is a family legend regarding my uncle Lowell "Bussy" Gaffin. He died at the age of 17 in 1942 of bronchial pneumonia. This is my story as told to me by my mother and aunt of Bussy's intervention on my behalf, ten years after his death.

I wonder how many more of his nieces he has helped in his own, angelic way?

Surrounded by his family, Bussy spent his last minutes on earth telling them goodbye. They knew that he would be leaving them soon and so pressed close to his bed, some taking his hand, some standing and weeping quietly. For a moment, it appeared as if Bussy had made his flight to heaven when he smiled, and eyes stretched wide in wonder, exclaimed, "I see children – I see beautiful children! Don't worry. She'll be all right! I'll be there! I'll take care of her!" Perplexed, his siblings bent forward in the hope of understanding their brother's message, but Bussy was gone. Their dear, sweet brother: happy, musical, smiling Bussy... was gone. One of

the people there was his 15-year-old sister Reva, my mother.

It was November, and the upstairs bedroom was icy cold. An impression of heat from the pot-bellied stove below wafted up the stairs, teasing the inhabitants with a promise of warmth should they descend the narrow, splintered staircase. A blue and white pitcher sat upon an ancient dresser, the water within it rimed with a thin skin of ice. In spite of the cold, Reva, now 20, lay, bathed in sweat, writhing in the throes of flesh-tearing labor. The pain was excruciating, bone crushing, relentless. Gripping the vertical bars of the iron bed, she strained, sweat coursing down her temples, her forehead, running into her eyes, dripping from her chin. The sweat-soaked feather mattress beneath her was disarrayed, its feathers pushed aside by the thrashings of her tortured body. The baby would not come!

Nita died seconds after birth. Despairing of his patient's life, the elderly country doctor was ill equipped and without the resources of a modern hospital to deliver the infant successfully. He had crushed her head in order to release her from the tortured body of her mother. The

baby had been deformed, her enlarged head unable to break through the iron grip of her mother's pelvis. Sobbing weakly, Reva held out her arms toward her child as she watched a tiny hand slowly relax and still.

Reva had longed for this baby, had ached for it, her life centered on the birth of this child who now lay at the foot of the bed, her tiny body motionless in death. All of the pain, the joy, the waiting, had come to nothing. Reva thought about Bussy's prophecy and prayed that he had been referring to his newly born niece and that her uncle in heaven would meet Nita. This was the only way she could bear her loss. The only way she could live through this death.

The following years were difficult. Sitting at bus stops, she would see a mother with a baby, and her arms would ache. Thrusting her hands beneath her armpits to imprison them, she would fight the urge to run and grab the bundle. She longed to hold it close to her heart, smell its sweet baby smell and somehow assuage the tearing pain within her heart.

Stricken with grief, it was a while before Reva realized that she was once again pregnant. The timing was poor: her marriage was falling apart. Her husband had started drinking while in the Army during WWII. At first, it had not been too serious, but as the years passed, his drinking increased until he seldom came home sober at night.

In spite of her marital problems, she was thankful, even ecstatic. She vowed that this pregnancy would not go wrong. This child would live no matter what! This child must live, and she would fix her eyes and heart on the birth of her baby.

Her pregnancy advanced without incident, until once again six months pregnant, she awoke in the middle of the night to find her husband standing above her as she lay in bed. He was drunk, drunker than she had ever seen him. Weaving, barely able to stand, clothes dirty and awry, he had slurred, "This baby isn't mine, you whore," and collapsed onto the floor. She was devastated and got little sleep that night.

She arose early to make her husband's breakfast. It always amazed her how he could awake with no hangover, no memory of the night before. She realized that he had not meant what he had said, but the words tore at her heart. She felt trapped. This was not the man she had married – not this drunk, this sloven.

Eddie had always been a sharp dresser. Witty, fun-loving, always ready for a laugh, he had won her heart one day in the same farm house back yard in which I would someday play. He had arrived with her sister Roma's future husband, Lee, and upon seeing her, had gone straight into a

handspring, landing directly in front of her with a bow. He was magnificent! But the sights of WWII, the terrors of Mittelbau-Dora, the concentration camp in Nordhausen, Germany, D-Day and other battles, had damaged him for life. Slowly, slowly, his memories would erode his spirit, and he would drink until he fell into a stupor where he would not dream.

Reva thought of these things as she washed the breakfast dishes. She didn't want to think, didn't want to dwell on the disintegration of her marriage. It was a beautiful, if windy day. Perhaps some exercise would help. It was a tragic decision. Dazed from lack of sleep and still in her bedclothes, she decided to go to her back yard to rake and burn leaves. Her long robe lifted in the wind, a spark, a whoosh and she was a pillar of flame.

In a flash, Reva remembered her paternal grandmother who had died by fire. She had been milking and had accidentally overturned a lantern onto her skirt. Hysterical, she had run past a barrel full of rain water.

Gritting her teeth against the unbelievable pain, Reva carefully walked to the back door of her landlady. Knocking, she asked the astounded woman who answered the door to wrap her in a carpet. Pointing, Reva cried. "There, Doris, there! Your carpet!" Doris, fighting through her panic, grabbed the rug and rolled Reva in it. Her injuries were profound, some burns revealing bone.

Lying in her hospital room that first night, racked with pain, in labor and terribly frightened, Reva felt a stillness come over her room as if all sound and movement had been suspended. She looked toward her sister Roma, who was sitting in a chair by the bed, motionless as though frozen in time. Turning her head to the left, Reva noticed a shaft of moonlight streaming through her window. The shaft of light shifted, moved, and shimmered. As she stared at the beam in wonder, thinking that she was hallucinating, Bussy stepped out of the light, his hand held out to her. Smiling, he approached her bed. Returning his smile, Reva's heart lifted with happiness. Bussy was going to take her home, with her baby, and the pain would end. She and her baby would be together, with Bussy, forever. She extended her hand toward his, and their fingers touched. Still smiling, he said to her, "Don't worry, she'll be all right! I'll take care of her."

Reva laid there, her hand extended to meet her brother's, and felt a warmth rush through her body. Her pain abated, and the labor pains stopped immediately. She felt as if the moonbeam had wrapped around her and the light was penetrating every fiber of her being. Bussy continued to smile, backing away slowly, his arm still extended, until he disappeared

into the shaft of moonlight. Slowly the beam ceased to shimmer, the light softly dissipated, and darkness filled the window. Reva said goodbye to her brother a second time, once again with tears, but filled with gratitude that he had remembered his promise of ten years earlier.

Her pregnancy continued without further incident. The doctors and nurses were perplexed as to how this phenomenon had come about.

Worriedly, her doctor fussed around her, positive that this turn of events foretold coming tragedy, and his young patient would again lose a child. Despite his fears, I was born three months later with all my fingers and toes, and only a shock of gray hair to bear witness to my ordeal. It was December 2, 1952. I was here. My bridge lay ahead.



To Uncle Bussy

A promise many years before,
To a sister on his deathbed made,
Now on a moonlit night fulfilled:
Two lives by his touch saved.

A tortured form, scorched by flames,
An unborn child at risk.
A moonbeam streaks across the room –
From its shaft, a white form steps.

With loving eyes and extended hand,
The angel/sibling smiles,
“I will always take care of her,” he vows.
The mortal sister sighs.

A touch of hands, a wave of warmth,
The crushing pain abates.
The child within the straining womb,
Quiets and patiently waits.

The angel/brother smiles again,
Slowly returning to the beam.
He nods again to his sister,
Immortal and mortal eyes meet.

And I, the child, rescued that night,
Each day with gratitude,

Know that I was touched by an angel –
In a moon-filled hospital room.



We are not sure who wrote this tribute to Bussy, but it is believed to be composed by either his brother Marlin Landon “Bob” Gaffin, or his mother, Mary Evelena Gaffin, known as Mawmaw.

I cannot say, and I will not say
That he is dead – he is just away!
With a cheery smile and a wave of the hand,
He has wandered into an unknown land,
And left us dreaming how very fair
It needs must be since he lingers there.
And you, oh you who the wildest yearn
For the old-time step and the glad return,
Think of him faring on as dear
In the love of there as the love of here.
Think of him still as the same, I say:
He is not dead – he is just away.



The picture was from 1956: black and white, its deckled edges reminiscent of a time gone by, the kind of old photograph that you tore out of the yellow Kodak booklets. Depicted upon its mottled surface, was a small child clutching a stuffed animal. I touched the picture gently. “What a sweet little thing I was,” I mused. Then, “I don’t understand!”

My heart clenched as I gazed into the face of the me of so long ago. I had never been able to come to terms with the fate of the little girl in the photograph. So sweet, so loving, God’s most precious gift treated like so much garbage.

I look sad in the picture. Traces of tears are faintly visible. Most of my childhood pictures look like that: forlorn, saddened, and emotionally

abandoned. But there it is. These are the facts of my life, and they cannot be changed – what happened, happened, and the experiences of my childhood will not be denied.

Was I really ever a child? The eldest of three, I was the “outlander,” as my younger two siblings were by my mother’s second marriage. Nothing was good enough for my brother and sister. In my parents’ eyes, somehow, I was simply not good enough.

Until age four, I was a “princess.” My step-grandmother, Nana, could not do enough for me. Then my brother came home. I remember trying to climb onto her lap. She pushed me away and said, “Don’t ever do that again!”

I loved my brother, and never resented his arrival, but the rejection of Nana hurt terribly. I could not understand why she would change toward me so abruptly. Sadly, this was only the beginning of my abandonment.



I now realize that my mother’s second marriage was beginning to disintegrate. She had left my father when I was nine months old, and had immediately taken up with my stepfather, Johnny, who was also a WWII vet, also a drinker. Like many veterans who have witnessed the horrors of war, my stepfather was an alcoholic and his drinking was accelerating. What had once been a pleasant home life was turning into a battleground. When my sister arrived four years later, the outcome was inevitable.

I remember Christmases where my brother and sister would receive many toys and gifts of watches, clothing, candy. I would receive one pair of underwear, or maybe a robe. Not allowed to complain, as it was not in “the spirit of the day,” they sent me to my room if I did. If I tried to explain that my feelings were hurt, they pushed me away. My mother tried to make excuses, but her favoritism was so apparent that her words offered no comfort.



I was too young to comprehend these things. All I could understand was that the kisses and hugs, the sweet words and the snuggles were gone. My mother and stepfather lavished affection upon my brother and sister while I felt as if I were invisible. I could not understand why I was no longer worthy of love. What had I done? Had I been bad? Was I just one of those people whose presence was intolerable? What was wrong with me? Years later, my mother admitted to me that, when she looked into my sister's infant face for the first time, Amy took over her very soul. There was no room in her heart for anyone else. She no longer loved her husband, but she had Amy, her soul mate. So, there it was: Jeff had Nana, Amy had Mom; I had no one.

✱
Swinging Bridge

You made me walk my bridge alone,
Without a hand to hold.
I was too young to journey
With no one to call my own.

Instead of making memories
Of how to walk strong and true
I learned to travel by myself
In the hunt for shelter and food.

When life choices came my way
My step should have been strong and sure.
I faltered on my swinging bridge;
I had to crawl to remain secure.

Eventually I stood erect,

My back straight and strong.
I held on tight with the knowledge
That I would get to where I belong.

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