

# Survival of the Funniest Writing Contest First Place -- Adult

## A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES

by Laila Austefjord  
Gilroy, California

Standing in line at customs in Sea-Tac Airport with Little Man, my six month old baby asleep in a bag by my feet, I was contemplating how to explain that I should not pay duty on my sewing machine. Even with five years of English, I was not sure of pronunciations. Would logic work? Crew, blew, sewing machine, made sense. I'd try that. I put the machine on the counter and said: "This is my suing machine. Amid good-natured laughter, I was sent duty-free into my new world.

And new it was. 1960 and the U.S. was easily twenty years ahead of Norway in technology. Doors opened before I got to them, clothes dryers, toasters, foods I had never tasted or even heard of, fashions, everything new and exciting.

My husband had immigrated eight months earlier. He had landed a job, found a furnished studio apartment, gotten a telephone--first for me--a small black and white TV (also a first) on which we watched *Amos and Andy* every night after dinner.

Clothes dryer! What a godsend. I did not need to hang the two dozen handmade diapers to dry over the kitchen stove the way I had done in Norway. Baby food! What would they think of next? And it was good -- One evening we each had a little jar of Gerber's custard pudding for dessert.

Yes, life was easy in the United States, but I vowed to work on my communications skills when my husband bought me a frying pan for Christmas after I had asked for something black and feminine.

My husband invited three guys from work and their wives over for appetizers. Nothing fancy, he said, just chips and dips, that's how it was done here.

He drove me to the supermarket, and he and Little Man waited in the car. I found crackers and tiny rye bread as well as an assortment of cheeses and grapes. I searched in vain for liver pate but instead found ground steak and lamb. Back at home, I made little meatballs adding some cardamom to the steak mixture and frying them with onions. To the lamb, I added nutmeg, and after frying, arranged them elegantly on a bed of soft-oiled cabbage with a sprinkle of nutmeg on top of it .... Maybe these Americans could soon learn something from me.

As any good Norwegian, I had cans of fish balls, These I halved with a dollop of caviar paste on top and a toothpick in each. The toothpick was my husband's contribution. He said they should be in everything -- that was the American way.

Cubed cheeses, yes, with the dreaded toothpicks and crackers all around. Then a plate laden with small clusters of grapes. Well, I thought I was adapting nicely to my adopted country.

The guests arrived, friendly and out-going.

The fish balls did not go over well. Once the guests discovered that they were not boiled eggs, they left them alone.

"Ohm Swedish meatballs," they exclaimed.

I straightened them out "Strictly Norwegian here, these are ground steak and that's ground lamb."

"You mean ground beef." said one of the ladies.

"No, it said ground steak on the can," I said.

This time I got everyone's attention. "You bought it in a can?"

"Yes, it was called *Apple* or *Alpo* ....Yes, *Alpo*."

**"*Alpo*???? That's DOG FOOD!!!!"**

They were all scrambling to their feet.

I ran out of the kitchen to get the cans out of the garbage to show them that it was steak and lamb. Dog food, whoever heard of such a thing, didn't dogs just eat table scraps? I examined the can. "Oh good, it said lamb ..." I read on: "190 calories per serving .... 10% Iron ... 100% daily requirements to ensure your dog's healthy coat ...." Your dog's healthy coat? What had I done??!!

The rest of the evening was a blur, but I think one of the guests asked for a doggie bag.

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**Laila E. Austefjord**

*I am currently taking a class in Creative Writing through Gavilan College. This contest was one of our homeworks. I have never written anything, but have plans of creating a book for my nine grandchildren about growing up in Norway."*

# Survival of the Funniest Writing Contest

## First Place -- Youth

### MISCONCEPTIONS IN GRASS-BASED REPUTATIONS

by Christine Chang  
Cupertino, California

It's every traveler's nightmare; coming home from a three-week trip overseas, unkempt and weary from jet lag, only to find his house robbed, vandalized, or perhaps laced with unwelcoming spider webs and thriving with an entire ecosystem of dust mites. So while my family anticipated the comfort of returning to *Home Sweet Home* after our trip, we crossed our fingers and hoped to find our house just the way we left it. Against our wishes, we were granted (or perhaps cursed) with a little surprise, courtesy of the sprinkler system...

As the airport shuttle bus pulled around the corner to our house, our eyes bulged at the sight of a shock so grand it triggered a faint gasp from my brother and a shriek of "Ai yai yai!" from my mom. My dad nearly choked on his spit. We were staring at a relatively large patch of snot-colored, tangled, menacingly overgrown, and humiliating grass. Every blade of grass rooted firmly onto the face of our property had turned a sickening shade of yellow, so yellow it might as well have been hay. And unluckily for us this surprise didn't just come in a few patches on our lawn here and there. In fact, the *entire* identity of our grass had been transformed into a state of absolute yellowness. Shriveled into a mass of over-tanned sod, it was undoubtedly a genuine example of grass tortured by sun, and even worse, grass neglected by supposedly lazy owners.

The next day, while taking a walk, my mom and I waved to our neighbor from across the street, who just so happened to be watering her beautifully green lawn. As we approached, she looked over my shoulder at our sun-colored lawn, squinting her eyes at our grass as if she couldn't quite comprehend the sight. Her face twitched to one side in bewilderment. Then eyeing my mom condescendingly, she greeted us with the very words we dreaded, "What in the *world* happened to your grass?! Why don't you water it?" (As if we were blind and the idea of watering grass had never occurred to us). Her eyes narrowed with vague contempt, as if it had been the fault of our abilities that led to this disgrace. It wasn't until my mom wearily recounted our sprinkler tale that her suspicions of our carelessness relaxed and she became more accepting of our situation.

So it seems that people have the tendency to judge others by...well...grass. We often imagine the stereotypical trailer park of those living in poor conditions with dry, overgrown grass, yellowed with that unwelcoming feeling of negligent people who can't even manage to keep their grass a somewhat relative tint of green. On the other hand, mansions of the wealthy are contrasted with the image of manicured front lawns. In front of the "nice" houses,

every blade of grass is a shade of flawless green, lush and perhaps overfed with water and professional fertilizers and minerals of all sorts. From these stereotypes, people have come to assume that green grass on a front yard indicates more respectable residents while dry yellow grass represents the opposite.

Following the incident of our sprinkler breakdown, I'm sure that every passerby who walked past our house in light sufficient to recognize color made some sort of negative if not critical remark about our lawn directed towards our family. The repetitive process of someone walking by our lawn, continuing to stare at it over their shoulder, and then turning around to comment on the hideous grass did not cease for those few days of our family's "grassly" shame. As we watered our grass, passersby stared at us with that look of "tsk, tsk, tskness," while others seemed to snicker inwardly at our awkward situation. I could literally imagine the thoughts going on through their mind about how lazy, how unmannerly, and how oafishly we were to have let our grass go yellow. A shake of heads only confirmed my assumptions.

But though grass really is a key to residential appearance, it doesn't deserve to bear so much significance of who we are. It's only a trivial representation of the way in which we live. It's not as simple as green grass, yellow grass, respectable people and not respectable people. There's not a clearly distinguished category that classifies positive and negative attributes based on the color of their lawn. Determining one's position on the social ladder shouldn't be based on the shade of their grass in relevance to green and yellow.

When people assume the qualities of others with one glance at their front yard they are unfairly judging that person by the decision they made for their yard. It's true that decisions often foretell the qualities of someone, but when it comes to something as insignificant as grass, this decision doesn't deserve a cursory assumption from others. It's not just grass either. When people judge others by their decision on what classes to take, what to wear, and what to buy, it's the same thing as judging those people's opinions. So the next time you pass by some house with grass dying on their front yard, give them a break, and don't judge. You never know; maybe they're on a quest to save water and reduce pollution by avoiding those grass-greening fertilizers.

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**Christine Chang**

*"...I am a junior at Monte Vista High School....I enjoy writing in forms of poetry, social commentary and journalism....My dream job would be to work as a journalist for National Geographic, but ultimately I am interested in any career that involves working with people to enhance the social aspects of our community or even the world..."*

# Survival of the Funniest Writing Contest

## Second Place -- Adult

### A DATE FOR MY EX-HUSBAND

by Barbara Dykema  
Morgan Hill, California

So... here I am invited to my son's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday bash given by my ex at a posh restaurant. Tuxes would be a good dress choice. Furs and diamonds another. I have neither... nor do I have a date.

I am *not* going unescorted -- period! The personal columns were perfect (this was eons ago). I contacted a local guy; we talked and made a date (before I ever met him! I'm in a hurry for gosh sake). He sounded good, not like a predator or a recent parolee. He could put a sentence together. He said he was employed. I didn't have time to chat, just meet me at the restaurant (did I mention it is *posh*?) I'll be the one working my way around the tuxedos and fur coats. I'll wait in the lobby.

He said I would know him the minute he comes in. Oh boy... I was nervous. I was pacing and thought about taking up smoking. How would I know him? I was sure he looked like Paul Newman or Tom Selleck. No one walking in that door yet was close to that. I wait...and wait and pace and drag on an invisible cigarette. The guests are seated and I am waiting by the door...seriously considering bolting or feigning sick. I cannot go in to that room without as escort. I see him! It has to be him. As he approaches the revolving door, for a split second I almost jump in and run down the street. OMG he is in an orange, yes, *orange!!* leisure suit. His hair is slicked back with something and his aftershave beats him through the door. I just stare and blink. Did I mention to him this was a dress up affair or... is he just stuck in the 60's?

Now we have to enter the reserved birthday room, with personal waiters at each chair. My ex, looking more like Tom Selleck in a tux, and all of his well-dressed friends are sipping martinis. Conversation ceases and a deafening quiet hangs in what's left of the air. Both of my sons, looking like bouncer bookends, stand up and start toward this guy. I ask for a double anything... and hurry. My date, and I use that term loosely, asks the closest waiter for a Bud Light. I'm kind of guessing right about now that his truck is covered with faded and torn Raider decals (probably Oakland Raider decals) and empty, crushed cigarette packs thrown on the worn out, cracking (probably faded blue) dashboard. Oh boy... It's going to be a long night. I have to introduce him and I can't remember his name. He resembles Buddy Holly and he's from Hollister and he drinks Bud Light and

I'm confused and I just call him Bud. I don't dare make eye contact with one living soul in the room. My ex stands up, sucks in his paunch, downs his martini and saunters over to gloat. He introduces himself to "Bud", sticking out his well-manicured, heavy gold-ringed hand and I have become quite shy and demure. Bud stands and comes up to my ex's shoulder. I look at my watch and all of 7 ½ long, agonizing minutes have passed. How many more surprises could the evening hold?

Everything eventually does end including any life I may have had that night. Everyone was graciously phony to "Bud", but I was the one who had to get home and he had the vehicle. My ex and his girlfriend get in to their limo... and wait to watch what I get in to.

Topping off the night is our departure from this swanky restaurant.

"Bud" had a valet ticket and I had no inkling of what he drove, but I had a hunch. I am a pretty good "huncher." All I knew was he had to "work" that day and came in his "work" truck. He was in construction, I think. Did we even discuss this on our first phone interview? Across the street, I hear the revving of a pick-up truck with a missing muffler... and, oh by the way, in the back of the truck... a bathtub! He did come from work, indeed!! Oh the looks and snickers were merciless. All the way home I wondered how he was going to make it up the hill to my house. I offered to take a cab or call a friend or beg my ex to drive me home or walk.

The climb up the hill was painfully slow. The tub slipped further back as the incline increased. As we crested and started the decline, the tub started sliding forward. Metal tub + metal truck = screeeeech! My driveway is right here, just let me out. "Bud" the gentleman would not hear of it, but I insisted. He wanted to take me to my door. Not tonight, or tomorrow or this century.

As he faded off in to the sunset I decided re-examine a few things in my life. Dating through the personal ads would probably stop. Bathtubs in trucks would always bring a smile.

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**Barbara Dykema**

*"I have been writing since 4<sup>th</sup> grade and have had a few poems published. I have written personal poems for all of my friends and my grandchildren. Today I am making greeting cards and writing funny sayings on some of them. It's a wonderful "hobby" to write and create."*

# Survival of the Funniest Writing Contest

## Third Place -- Adult

(Untitled)

by Linda McGinnis  
Gilroy, California

Breast Cancer is no laughing matter but the Universe, nonetheless, conspired to keep me laughing during that challenging chapter in my life. Like the day an old friend hugged me, not long after I was diagnosed, and said soothingly, "Don't worry. It'll grow back." I looked down at the offending breast with puzzlement and then back at him. He reddened and said "I meant your hair."

But I was one of the lucky ones who side-stepped chemo and went from lumpectomy to radiation. Debilitating as it was, I was grateful not to have to endure the ravages of poisons trickling through my veins. Not that I didn't have my challenges: we were in the middle of a home remodel; I had no kitchen or upstairs bathrooms; my husband was entering his busiest time of the year and would need to be away a great deal; we had two friends who were in transition living with us at the time; and my daughter had just been laid off and faced the prospect of a lengthy and difficult job search. After a requisite amount of time feeling genuinely sorry for myself, I decided that the Universe chose the precise moment to give me the cancer so I couldn't spend an excessive amount of time worrying about it.

Part of the protocol set up by the radiation physicians, (whom I named Dr. Mapper and Dr. Zapper) was to put cold compresses on the breast each day after my treatment. As the weather turned colder, it was an additional torture to apply ice cold cloths to my already tender and inflamed breast. I developed an elaborate scheme to keep warm which included a heavy bathrobe, fuzzy socks, a hot water bottle, a steaming cup of tea, a comforters and sometimes, a hat. Once ready, I would place the first of the three, ice cold cloths gently on my sad little bosom and moan with misery. Then I'd sing a little titty, I mean ditty, about lying on the beach on a tropical isle.

In preparation for the final week of my treatment, some changes were made. During the last five days, the focus of the radiation would be narrowed, New coordinates were determined by Dr. Mapper. This involved a series of colored lines drawn in seemingly (I'm assured this is far from the truth) random ways, across and around my breast. The process was much quicker than the first time. presumably because they were better acquainted with the *contour of my body* or may they just wanted to get done so they could go and get a cup of coffee. Whatever ....

Although no one had in any way intimated that radiation might affect my capacity to process information, a case might be made for the idea that my ability to make rational decisions may have been impaired. That being said, let me proceed with the story. I was cautioned that the new coordinate lines were very important as they insured that my ribs, lungs and heart would be spared radiation. "Be very careful when you apply the cold compresses to make sure you don't erase or blur any of the lines," Dr. Zapper warned me.

I was extremely cautious with the compresses that day but still managed to wipe off a good deal of the "very important" markings. (It was certainly never that easy to get ink off of my kids when they used to make a mess.) Guilt-stricken and fearful of chastisement, and possibly instant death, I appeared at my treatment the following morning apprehensive about their reaction to my failure and anxious to learn how I could avoid a reoccurrence. They said "No big deal." and redrew the lines. However, I was told again to be very careful and still was not given any hints as to how to accomplish that.

Once home, I decided that there must be a better way to preserve the marks and after considerable deliberation, came up with what I thought to be a brilliant idea. (See sentence #1, paragraph #5) I decided that the site needed to be protected (covered) while I was applying the compresses and that the ideal way to do that was with Saran Wrap. I stood in the kitchen half-naked and carefully wrapped my torso with what I believed to be a sufficient amount of covering. Just as I was placing the box back in the drawer, our gardener came walking down the side just outside the new huge kitchen window.

I dropped to the floor, intending to slither across to a more sheltered spot where I could hide until he'd gone back out front. What I could not have anticipated was that while Saran Wrap does not always adhere to a bowl, it does stick to the floor, particularly when a considerable weight is on top of it. I lay there, laughing and crying, seeing myself quite clearly now on that wonderful tropical isle, a beached whale!

However, success was mine! I went to my appointment the next day, lines completely in tact, and told Dr. Zapper the entire, unbelievable story. He chortled in disbelief. "All I can say is, if it works," he laughed "stick to it!"

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**Barbara McGinnis**

*"I have been writing since the second grade and have written poetry, fiction and non-fiction and young adult literature. The publishing world is still waiting to discover me. Meanwhile, I have started a photography business focusing on our town called **Glimpses of Gilroy.**"*