


» Cars » Auto Financing » Event Tickets » Jobs » Real Estate » Online Degrees » Business Opportunities » Shopping

Search

How do I find it?

Subscribe to paper »



The Five-Forty-Five to Cannes

Tess Uriza Holthe
author of
When the Elephants Dance

"Uriza Holthe's brilliant collection of stories takes readers on a speeding train ride through the fascinating lives of her nuanced characters."
—*Booklist* (starred review)



Home News Travel Money Sports Life Tech Weather

Become a member of the USA TODAY community now!
[Log in](#) | [Become a member](#)
What's this?



Life » Books Top 150 Books Shop for Books

Excerpt from 'Society's Child'

Posted 5/12/2008 3:43 PM | [Comment](#) | [Recommend](#)

E-mail | [Save](#) | [Print](#) | [RSS](#)

By **Janis Ian**

Anyway, I was alone in the apartment, absentmindedly playing a lit-tle samba part on the guitar while I read an article about debutantes. The woman who'd written it was talking about her coming out party, how excited she'd been before it, how ?at she'd felt in the aftermath. The opening line was "I learned the truth at eighteen."

Interesting line, I thought. Might be a song in there somewhere. I hunted around for a melody to go with my samba lick, and tried the line. Nope, it didn't scan. I needed another syllable.

I learned the truth at seventeen, I sang to myself. Something in me clicked, turned over, examined the line, and I got a chill up my spine. I continued to play as I read more of the article. She'd been elected queen of her class, and thought that would solve all her problems. It didn't.

What rhymes with seventeen? I wondered. "Beauty queen," of course. I grabbed pad and pen, then wrote the ?rst four lines:

I learned the truth at seventeen

FIND MORE STORIES IN: [Child](#) | [Society](#) | [Penguin Group](#) | [Ah](#) | [Copyright](#) | [Janis Ian](#)

That love was meant for beauty queens

and high school girls with clear-skinned smiles

who married young, and then, retired

I stared at the paper. How could I write about high school girls, or prom night and homecoming queens? I hadn't had any of those experi-ences. I thought about that for a while. There were plenty of other school things I had experienced. I knew what it was like to never be asked out on a date. I knew the sinking feeling when everyone else in class came in to ?nd a valentine on their desk, and yours was empty. And I sure as heck knew what it was to feel clumsy and ugly. I could write this song, I was sure of it.

The chords and melody felt familiar from the ?rst. In fact, I got so worried I'd unconsciously lifted someone else's work that I called a friend with an encyclopedic memory for pop music and sang him a verse, anxiously waiting until he said, "Nope. Never heard it before. Pretty, though."

Writing "At Seventeen" took a long time. I went carefully, afraid that if I rushed, it would lose its intensity. I didn't care much whether I told the truth, but I wanted it to be truthful to my own life. As I began toss-ing in lines like "Those of us with ravaged faces, lacking in the social graces," I became increasingly shy about singing it to anyone. The song was really personal to me, now. I couldn't see facing an audience, sing-ing that line, then watching them search my face for pimples and scars. I was so short, they might laugh when I came to the line about never being chosen for basketball. At best, I'd look like a fool. At worst, they'd think I was whining.

By the time I ?nished the second verse two months later, I'd decided I'd never sing it in public. It was just too humiliating. I was sure no one else felt that way. Everyone else was more popular, more socially adept, than I'd ever been. No one would relate to it; they'd probably laugh.

Decision made, I could ?nish the song in peace. But I'd said all the embarrassing things I wanted to say, and the song was still a full verse short.

I let it go for a few weeks, then had an idea. Why not involve the lis-tener? Why not suddenly look at it from a different point of view en-tirely, and bring them in on it? So I started my last verse by assuming that out there, somewhere, there was at least one other person who'd been through what I'd been through:

To those of us who knew the pain

of valentines that never came

The song ended with:

Repenting other lives unknown

that call and say—Come dance with me

and murmur vague obscenities

at ugly girls like me, at seventeen

Ah. Resolution, ?nally. I'd called myself "ugly." No one would dare laugh at that. And by using "ugly duckling," I felt I'd given the song some hope, because the ugly duckling always turns into a swan.

Related Advertising Links

What's this?

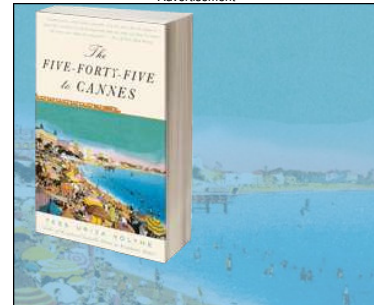
Alternative To Open Back Surgery

World Leader of Arthroscopic Procedures for Back and...
www.laserspineinstitute.com

Mortgage Refinance: Fed Rate at 2%

160,000 Mortgage for \$633/mo No SSN reqd. Free...
www.lendgo.com

Advertisement



Featured Advertiser

What's this?

CHOOSING HONOR by Mary T. Ficalora

An American Woman's Search for God, Family, and Country in an Age of Corruption
availpress.com



Reprinted from Society's Child by Janis Ian by arrangement with Jeremy P. Tarcher, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., Copyright © 2008 Available wherever books are sold.

Share this story:



[Yahoo! Buzz](#)

[Digg](#)

[Newsvine](#)

[Reddit](#)

[Facebook](#) What's this?

Posted 5/12/2008 3:43 PM

[E-mail](#) | [Save](#) | [Print](#) | [RSS](#)

To report corrections and clarifications, contact Reader Editor **Brent Jones**. For publication consideration in the newspaper, send comments to letters@usatoday.com. Include name, phone number, city and state for verification.

Guidelines: You share in the USA TODAY community, so please keep your comments smart and civil. Don't attack other readers personally, and keep your language decent. Use the "Report Abuse" button to make a difference. [Read more](#).

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Log in](#) | [Register](#)

Empty comment input area with a vertical scrollbar on the right side.

Comments: (0) Showing: [Newest first](#)

Sponsored Links

American Express® Cards

Great card offers from American Express! Compare and apply online. www.americanexpress.com

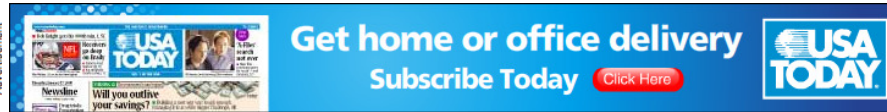
Crestor®

(rosuvastatin calcium) OfficialSite - Learn More. Crestor.com

Free Home Repair Warranty Quote

Protect yourself from costly home repairs homerepairguard.com

[Get listed here](#)



Newspaper Home Delivery - Subscribe Today

[Home](#) • [News](#) • [Travel](#) • [Money](#) • [Sports](#) • [Life](#) • [Tech](#) • [Weather](#)

About USATODAY.com: [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Jobs with Us](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Privacy Policy/Your California Privacy Right](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Press Room](#) | [Reprints and Permissions](#)

News Your Way: [Mobile News](#) | [Email News](#) | [IM Alerts](#) | [Add USATODAY.com RSS feeds](#) | [Podcasts](#) | [Widgets](#)

Partners: [USA WEEKEND](#) | [Sports Weekly](#) | [Education](#) | [Space.com](#)

Copyright 2008 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.