

January 2024

Join me on a journey through the last six months

Happy New Year!

I know, I know. It's been too long since I've written—a newsletter to you or a chapter in my next book. The last six months have been full of many things, but not many words. It's time now to transform into story those precious, intense, illuminating moments—experiencing life and death, sustaining friendships, embracing grandchildren, discovering new worlds. I invite you to come with me this time, to read not about my latest book but about my life.

First, the Hard Stuff

*I lost two people this year—my 101-year-old mother-in-law
and one of my closest friends.*



She was “Mommy” to me, “Mom” to her sons, “Oma” to her grandchildren, “Mousy” to her childhood friends, and “Hertha” to everyone else. She arrived in the United States from Germany at the age of twenty-six with her husband and two little boys under the age of three, a few years after the devastation of World War II. Her passion for music and gardening, her curiosity about the world, and her delight in her family and friends sustained her and helped her to flourish in her new country. In her later years, dementia took its toll, chipping away at her independence and her determination not to be a burden. Over the last fifteen years, I took on the role of her caregiver. In many ways, that experience has shaped how I write about the elders in my stories and their relationships with their adult children—from Rose’s Italian immigrant father in *Across the Table* to Lydia Hammond in *Island Legacy* and Raffaello Richetelli in *A Place of Refuge* I had the privilege of being

at my mother-in-law's bedside when she passed, a profound moment of peace.

We celebrated her life twice—in Massachusetts, where she had spent most of her life, and in Bavaria, where she was born and grew up. Both services were filled with music. In America, a trio (violin, cello, and piano) played her favorite pieces, selected by her nearly twenty years ago and saved by my son. In Germany, a glorious choir filled the Baroque cathedral where she had been baptized and received her First Communion. After the Mass, we walked through the village to the cemetery behind an acolyte carrying a cross.



Joni and I met when we were in our twenties, young married women living in a suburban development outside of Boston. We were unlikely friends. She was the at-home mother of three children and I was working as an editor for a book publisher. But our husbands were often gone in the evenings —hers to night school to earn his undergraduate degree and mine to business travel. We filled those hours in her kitchen, drinking tea, eating Sara Lee cake, and talking honestly about our lives. She moved away first, but we managed to continue to build our friendship. When my then-husband walked out on me when I was nine months pregnant, she drove back to the old neighborhood at 11:00 at night to stay with me and the next morning moved me into her house to await the birth of my son. Her calm presence, outrageous sense of humor, and confidence in my ability to get through that very dark time saved my life.

Our bond over more than fifty years remained strong, filled with shared joys and challenges. And then, her daughter texted me one night. Joni had been diagnosed with lung cancer. This time, it was I who made the drive. She was graced with a year, but at an excruciating cost from the chemo. Each time I visited we talked as we had those nights long ago, acknowledging the gift of our friendship. Her dying has left a huge hole in my heart, but I keep in my memory how her resilience and strength inspired and supported me.



A Little Help from My Friends

My women friends are amazing!

Some of them gather every summer in the Catskills to drink tequila, hike, allow me to cut their hair, compose a dating site profile for the currently unattached one in the group, and solve the problems we've each encountered over the year.

Some of them work with me at Crow River Farm to plant, weed, harvest, prepare vegetables for pick up, share a coffee and a pastry at a local bakery when our shift is over, and solve the problems we've each encountered that week.

Some of them offer me a bed, a glass of wine, and a listening ear when I travel to Boston for respite or recreation or responsibility.

Some of them share a world of ideas and empathy in a monthly discussion group that has existed for over 120 years, founded when women sought intellectual challenge beyond the societal restrictions that kept them from fulfilling their needs.

Some of them work for social justice or encourage each other's creative lives or offer guided meditation sessions or foster and celebrate our Italian heritage. My friendships are a colorful tapestry that enriches and nourishes me.



Granddaughters!

For Christmas this year, instead of a family gathering at my house, complete with 10-foot Christmas tree, Oma's and Grandma's signature cookies, and a multi-course Christmas Eve spread, my husband and I ventured halfway around the world to Tokyo to spend the holidays with our younger son, Mark; his wife, Ji; and their two daughters,

Kaia and Sabine.

I dove fully into my Nonna role and spent the time marveling at dinosaur bones and an animated version of the development of life on earth in the National Museum of Nature and Science; building (and rebuilding) Sleeping Beauty's castle with what seemed like a thousand pieces of Lego; reading aloud from *Stories for Girls* and *The Day the Crayons Quit*, which is a laugh-out loud story told by every color in a boy named Duncan's crayon box; cuddled with one-year-old Sabine and marveled at her ability to communicate with gestures and babbling.

But my favorite and most appreciated activity was sitting several times for hairstyling by four-year-old Kaia, who emptied her trove of barrettes and hair clips to create the colorful masterpiece you see captured above.



Trains, Planes, Subways, Busses and Automobiles



The trip to Tokyo, in addition to adventures with granddaughters, immersed me in the very urban life my son and his family now lead and love—after a twenty-hour door-to-door journey that literally involved every form of transportation listed in the headline. Despite the long trip and the fourteen-hour time difference, I managed to jump into Japanese life with enthusiasm, guided by Mark and Ji.

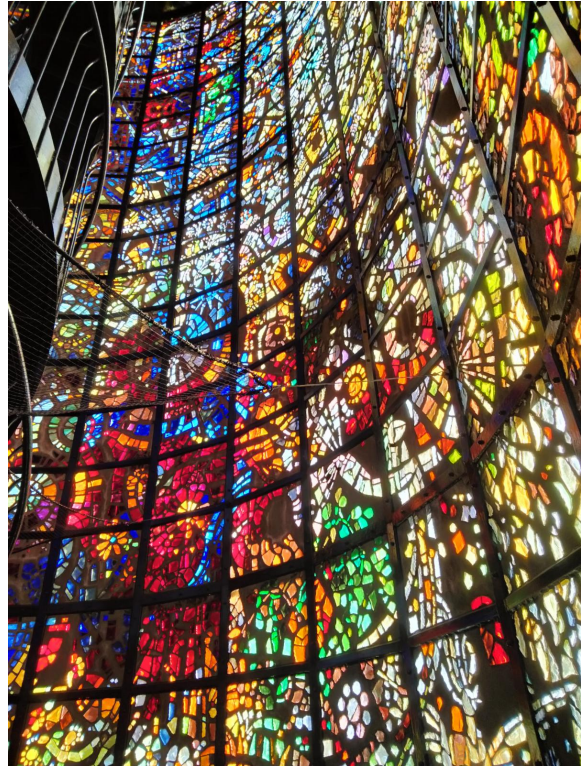
Tokyo is a densely populated, complex city that has evolved over centuries. Mark and his family live in a neighborhood of narrow streets navigated mostly on foot or bicycle. Ji has a “Mom” bike with seats in the back and front for the girls, and they are ubiquitous as mothers ferry their children from school to playground and home again. We spent most of our visit in the city, traveling to museums and parks via the intricate subway system.

We also made an excursion to Hakone, a mountain town outside of Tokyo famous for its hot springs and its proximity to Mt. Fuji. We spent several hours at an open-air museum spread over the side of a hill, dotted with sculpture, including a permanent collection of works by Henry Moore,

and buildings housing art. An entire building was devoted to the work of Picasso. Another featured the sculptural bronze doors of the Italian artist Giacomo Manzù. But in addition to the art, the landscape was dotted with imaginative play areas for children—a building that looked as if it had been constructed of Jenga blocks supporting a giant net inside for children to climb around in, and a rainbow of bars to clamber over.



Two of my favorite works are pictured on the right. I was struck by the water flowing from the eyes of the resting head and recognized the stream as tears.



The stained glass encircled a tower in which one could stand, enveloped by light and color.

The highlight of the Hakone trip was experiencing *onsen* or hot spring culture. In the evening, after our excursion to the open-air museum, Ji, Kaia, and I retired to the women's bath, where we soaked in the outdoor hot spring with the cool night air and the nearly full moon overhead. It was both an invigorating and a soothing experience that melted every muscle. And yes, we were naked.

What's Next in 2024

January is always a month for me to shut myself away in my office under the eaves and WRITE. I'll be picking up my current project, tentatively titled *Paint the Wind*. It's a story set in early 1900s Vienna, an era rich in the integration of art, psychology, and science.

I'm also teaching a writing workshop in an inner-city program for young men and planning to meet with writers' groups and book clubs.

If your writers' group, book club, or community program is interested in having me speak, I'm starting to book appearances for the Spring and would be happy to hear from you. Contact me [here](#).

My warmest wishes for a joyful and healthy 2024!

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