

Edited by
SONIA MARSH

My
Gutsy
Story®
Anthology

2

Inspirational Short Stories
About Taking Chances
and Changing Your Life



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My Gutsy Story® Anthology: Inspirational Short Stories About Taking Chances and Changing Your Life

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Dedication

To those who are already living a *gutsy* life, and to those who need a nudge to start their own. Everyone has a “My Gutsy Story®”; some of us just need a little help to uncover ours.

My wish is to create a global community where we can feel safe to share our own “My Gutsy Story®” and help one another take risks in life. — Sonia Marsh

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Peter Jones

DOING EVERYTHING, BEING HAPPY



ON MY THIRTY-SECOND BIRTHDAY, as I sat at my mother's dining room table in front of a large cake, thirty-two candles threatening to ignite my beard should I lean too far forward, I realised that the only ambition I had left in life — the only dream I hadn't given up on — was to be married.

Or at least in some sort of steady, loving relationship.

A long-term partnership with someone whose ying was a close match to my less-than-melodic yang.

But even this — this last, naive expectation of life — was looking increasingly unlikely. Every candle on that cake was some sort of burning epitaph to just how utterly rubbish I was when it came to affairs of the heart.

There had been relationships in the past — of course there had — but I'd kind of fallen into them by accident. And after the ladies in question had tried, and failed, to mould me into the kind of man they wanted, those relationships had withered and died. There hadn't been

an ‘accidental relationship’ for a while. Colleagues no longer described me as an eligible bachelor. Some had started to question my sexuality.

So as my family launched into a rendition of “Happy Birthday”, I decided there and then that the prospect of being single for the rest of my days was unacceptable.

Something had to be done.

Around that time there was a TV show called *Would Like to Meet*, where a team of experts would take some hapless individual and turn him or her into a heartthrob or a man-magnet. It very quickly became my favourite TV show. I’d watch it avidly from one week to the next, hoping to pick up some tips. And the conclusion I came to was that I, too, could do with a similar makeover — albeit without the entire viewing nation of the United Kingdom looking on.

So over the next few weeks I tracked down image consultants, and I contacted one. Back then, image consultants mainly worked for corporations, restyling senior corporate executives who might otherwise look less than sharp in the boardroom. But I had surprisingly little problem persuading my consultant of choice to broaden the scope of her client base to include one sad and lonely thirty-something guy. She took one look at me, threw away every item of clothing I’d acquired in the previous decade, and in an afternoon gave me some much needed va-va-voom in the wardrobe department.

And once I’d been completely restyled, I looked around for a flirt coach.

These days, you can barely move for self-styled relationship experts and flirt coaches, but back in 2003 I could find just one. And she ran courses.

I took several hundred pounds from my savings, and booked myself on a ‘flirting weekend’. Nervously, I took my place in the front row and, when instructed, turned and introduced myself to the stunning blonde sitting next to me.

“I’m Peter,” I said.

“I’m Kate,” said the blonde.

Then she smiled.

And I was smitten.

The course wasn’t that much of a success, in that it didn’t teach me how to flirt. Not that it mattered. My strategy had worked, somewhat differently but infinitely better than I’d hoped. On the Monday evening, Kate and I had our first date. By the Tuesday I’d officially found myself a girlfriend. A few months later I found myself on one knee. And a year to the day after we first met, I found myself married.

And when she died in my arms just two years later, I was heartbroken.

People rarely ask me how Kate died. It’s not the sort of question they feel comfortable asking. Most assume she must have had cancer — that we’d have had some warning. We didn’t.

I’ve learnt since that sudden deaths like Kate’s (a subarachnoid haemorrhage) are surprisingly common. Kate had a weak part in her brain, probably since birth. It could have happened at any moment. It was almost inevitable.

I learnt, too, that after the shock comes the guilt. Every cross word, every nasty thought, every lie — they all come back to haunt you. And among the demons that were queuing up to torment me was the realisation that I still wasn’t happy, and maybe I never had been. There had been happy moments, of course. Quite a lot of moments. Most of them in the previous three years, and most of them down to Kate; but they were moments nonetheless. And I wanted to be happy all the time. Not just occasionally. Not just for a moment.

Something had to be done.

I decided to tackle the problem the only way I knew how: by making lists and coming up with a strategy.

“So what,” people ask, “is in this ... ‘happiness strategy’?”

I tell about my ‘Now List’, my ‘Wish List’, how I set myself yearly goals, and how I make sure I actually achieve them.

I tell them how I've taken back control of my life, decided how I want it to be, pointed it in that direction, and given it a kick up the backside.

I tell them how I'm having more fun than I've ever had. Smiling more than I ever did. How there's love in my life again. How I think Kate would be proud of me. And that I can finally say, I'm happy.

PETER JONES started professional life as a particularly rubbish graphic designer, followed by a stint as a mediocre petrol pump attendant. After that he got embroiled in the murky world of credit card banking, where he developed 'fix-it-man' superpowers.

Now, Peter spends his days — most of them, anyway — writing. He is the author of three-and-a-half popular self-help books on the subjects of happiness, staying slim, and dating. If you're overweight, lonely, or unhappy — he's your guy.

Find out more about Peter Jones, his books, speaking engagements and workshops, at www.peterjonesauthor.com

Destiny Allison

IN AN INSTANT



IN AN INSTANT, MY WORLD COLLAPSED. It wasn't just the absence of planes in the sky or the way people wandered around blank and numb. By then I'd turned off the news, not wanting my young children to be more frightened than they already were. Like most, I did what I had to do to get through the days. I even bought a flag and hung it on my porch — solidarity with my country, grief for what had been lost. I went to work, interacted with a new boss I couldn't stand, and did my job. Until, that is, I didn't have one.

The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack had destroyed the economy and crushed the annual fundraiser our small nonprofit depended upon. As fast as the planes had hit the buildings, and with the same shock of disbelief and terror, I was unemployed.

I was a single mom, raising my three children alone. There was little in the way of child support, only a pittance in my savings account, and a new mortgage I couldn't afford. Everything in me froze. Where would I find a job? How would I care for my kids? Through long and sleepless

nights, I stared at the ceiling, my heart racing. Then as winter crept up frost-covered windows, something in me started to thaw. Could my layoff have been a gift? Was there a message in all of this?

I had been an artist for years, wrestling my clay and wax at night and on weekends when my children were sleeping or occupied. I had placed a few pieces in local galleries and even sold some, but never enough to let me quit my proverbial day job. Making art was the only thing I never gave up on, the only thing that offered my hard life a measure of relief. In those cold days between Thanksgiving and Christmas, while I worried how to keep the heat on, a voice kept whispering, “Now or never, girl. It’s now or never.”

I made the leap. Instead of job hunting, I started making things, submitting my portfolio to shows, and praying. Instead of reacting to my circumstances, I would change them, take control of my life for the first time, and become the woman I wanted to be.

The first show was hard, but I sold just enough to pay my bills and get to the next one. I learned everything I could about my new business and applied it quickly. The second show was a little better. By summer, I was making more money than my old job had paid me. It was hard. Really, really hard, but I was doing it.

I worked seven days a week, building sculptures as fast as I could. Some of them I didn’t like, some were OK, and others had that glimmer of something that made me catch my breath. It didn’t matter what I thought about the work. It sold. All of it. What I thought was terrible brought a buyer to tears. The art moved people.

I learned how to talk about my work and share the personal stories that inspired the pieces. I learned how to price, when to spend money and when to save it, and how to be myself. Instead of dressing to impress, I dressed for comfort so I wasn’t self-conscious while selling my work. Every six weeks I took to the road for a week or two. I hired nannies — something I will always regret — missed my kids, and worried they would feel I had abandoned them. In some ways, I did. But I

had no choice. They needed food, clothes, a roof over their heads, and a decent education. Their teenage years were hard on all of us. Every time I wondered whether I was doing the right thing, I thought that if I gave up my passion, I would teach them to do the same. I couldn't live with that, so I chose to model what it takes to make it — and spent as much time with them as I could.

Fast forward twelve years. My children are grown, and I am proud of them. They are wonderful, self-sufficient, and kind. I met the love of my life and married him. I am internationally collected, exhibited by top galleries, and living the dream come true.

Then, unexpectedly and in the weirdest way, I threw my back out permanently. My studio days are numbered, my income is dropping, and all of a sudden I'm writing. I released *Shaping Destiny* last year. It is the story of how I found my voice as an artist. Having just released my second book, *Pipe Dreams*, I am reminded of that first journey. Like then, I'm facing a road that is long and hard, but I trust it will be infinitely rewarding.

I can do this. I can face my fears and conquer my misgivings. That little voice is whispering again. "Now or never, girl," it says. The difference this time is that I know who I am, what I can do, and have a family that understands and supports my process. Because I believe in myself, they do, too.

DESTINY ALLISON: Destiny Allison is an award-winning sculptor, businesswoman, and community builder, but writing was her first love. Last year, she published *Shaping Destiny: A Quest for Meaning in Art and Life*. The nonfiction work was recently awarded first place for nonfiction/memoir in the 2013 Lucky Cinda Global Book Contest.

Pipe Dreams is her fiction debut, and other fictional works are soon to follow. Allison believes that our lives are our greatest

works of art and that we have to be who and what we are, not who and what we're supposed to be. This theme is reflected in her written works, sculptures, and business endeavors. Allison lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with her husband and dogs, alternately missing and celebrating her three grown sons. Website: www.DestinyAllison.com

Penelope James

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN THE GOOD TIMES END?



MY ADVERTISING CAREER STARTED in London and ended in Mexico City in 1990 when my boss persuaded me to take early retirement. I heard “corporate takeover casualties,” but he was so smooth that for several minutes I didn’t understand that he meant “you’re fired.”

After I agreed to resign in exchange for a hefty sum, he asked, “What will you do next?”

“I’ll get rid of my high heels, give away my business suits, let my hair grow down to my waist — and strangle you with my pantyhose. Then, I’ll open a restaurant.” I’d been toying with this idea for a while. Just needed the money to get it going. With my severance package, marketing savvy, and cooking expertise, I knew it would be a success. Provide me with an income for life. At forty-six, I had high expectations.

Handling millions of dollars of other people’s money was easy compared to handling my own. There’d always been someone to go to the bank for me and help with my accounts and investments. Now I

had to do them myself. Maybe I had a flutter of unease when I invested all of my money in this venture, took out loans and used credit cards up to the hilt, but I never expected I'd lose it all. My heart was not in this business; it was more like a romance on the rebound after the end of a long-time relationship.

The restaurant folded after a year, leaving me broke, rudderless, with no idea of where I was heading — except, it seemed, downward.

One morning a sudden urge woke me before dawn, and I wrote the first chapter of a novel that would become my companion for nine years. I completed a full draft in four-and-a-half months, right before my fiftieth birthday. Set in both contemporary and 18th century Mexico, my book had two protagonists and two plots. Overambitious, perhaps, but it kept me going through loss of business, money, status, and my home of 16 years. Gave me a goal. By my mid-fifties I'd be a published author and over this economic hump.

Catering provided an income, though not enough to keep up my former lifestyle. I sold half my belongings and moved to an apartment with a view of the Valley of Mexico. This inspired me to enter a world of mysticism, witches, brews, spells, and past-life experiences that all became fodder for the book. I taught business English and catered events until one afternoon an earthquake rocked my building and sixteen trays of hors d'oeuvres slid off tables and smashed on the floor. I lost my best client, my income plunged, and I fell behind with the rent. My landlord agreed to take my living room furniture and most valuable painting in lieu of what I owed him.

I downscaled to a bungalow — former servants' quarters — and plodded through a second draft. I wrote my frustrations, disappointments, fears into the pages, and the book became Gothic dark. An aching hip slowed me down.

A friend offered me a three-month house-sitting job in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with the bait that I'd have time to write. I ended up stranded, sleeping at her home between house-sitting gigs until she turned unfriendly. Tried pet-sitting. A client asked would I sleep with

his basset hound, meaning on the bed with me. A large, solid, tank-like dog that dribbled? My refusal didn't bode well for my career as a pet-sitter.

My computer conked out, so I wrote the old-fashioned way, by hand. My protagonists faced significant obstacles, as did I. A doctor diagnosed degeneration of my hip. I needed an operation. When? A year at most, depending on my tolerance to pain.

My hip deteriorated; I couldn't walk without a cane. I exchanged Santa Fe for life as an invalid in my son's apartment in Tijuana, a city on the Mexican/U.S. border. A doctor promised treatment to help regenerate cartilage. For eighteen months I believed I was making progress, even as the biting pain in my thigh grew worse. I wrote another two drafts of my book, a masterpiece of drama, supernatural happenings, and sex. Since I wasn't getting any, it helped to write about it.

My mother died and left a life insurance that covered a hip replacement. Within weeks of the operation I was ambulant again, and I set out on a job search in San Diego. With no business contacts there, no car, no phone, and almost no money, it meant, at fifty-six, trudging the streets looking for work instead of inhabiting an executive suite.

First I interviewed in ad agencies, where I came face-to-face with young MBAs bristling with Internet know-how and new marketing techniques. Next, want ads. Not computer savvy. Not qualified. Overqualified. A "*We're Hiring*" banner offered a stopgap measure — a job as a phone researcher. \$8 an hour. What a comedown, but the 1 to 9 p.m. shift was convenient for commuting across the border.

I became Susan — my first name — J. Whatever happened to Penelope who worked in solitary splendor in an elegant office? Now one of the hundred interviewers in the phone room, I sat in a cubicle wherever supervisors placed me. Another low-wage worker.

For four months I commuted four-and-a-half hours until I saved enough to move to the U.S. My new home was a hotel room. I wrote an eighth draft of my book. Gave my protagonists some happiness. They deserved it after all they had gone through.

Easy work, easy life. A two-year trap in a nothing job. An offer to work as a Hispanic research report writer put me back on track. In two weeks I made the same as in three months in the phone room. A new career beckoned. I could afford an apartment with a view of San Diego Bay. I shelved my book and started writing a riches-to-rags memoir.

Time to move on to the next stage in my life.

PENELOPE JAMES: Anglo-Mexican-American. Born in England, moved to Mexico City at 10. Worked in advertising agencies in New York, London, and Mexico City, and in Hispanic Research in the U.S. Author of *Don't Hang Up! Dialing My Way to a New Start* to be published this autumn. Co-writer of *Barriers to Love*, a memoir by Marina Peralta. Currently lives in San Diego, California.

Former Spanish-English translator, copywriter, report writer, columnist "Insights into Mexico" for *The Baja News*. Has published nonfiction short stories. A judge for the San Diego Book Awards since 2010. Website: www.donthangupbook.com