

The Purple Golf Cart
Stories of an
Unconventional Grandma



A Memoir by Ronni Sanlo

Purple Golf Cart:

The Misadventures of an Unconventional Grandma

*A Memoir
by
Ronni Sanlo*

1. At 63

March, 2007. I celebrated my 60th birthday every single day that month. Turning 60 seemed so surreal. Was that really me in the mirror? I don't remember aging, and I sure didn't feel 60, whatever that means. And why wasn't I able to know "way back then" what I know now? I suppose we all think those things when we get here. The true gift of aging, after all, is hindsight. Regardless, "60" felt strange rolling off my tongue. To make even more of an issue of turning 60—because I can be *such* a drama queen—it occurred to me that even under the best of circumstances, I've already lived more years than I have left. I intend to make the most of every single day.

I bought myself a purple golf cart for my 60th birthday—purple,

with hot pink upholstery and a white roof, my name in white script on the driver's side. I live in a golf community, Palm Desert Greens, for older folks—well, for people over 55 which I am, and mostly retired people, which I'm not. I am a passionate but pathetic golfer, purple is my favorite color, and, really, I just wanted it. When I'm on the streets of the Greens, old men wave to me and their grandchildren think I'm cool in my purple golf cart. But as an aging lesbian, I'm just happy with a girlfriend beside me as we motor through the elder-'hood.

Sixty was a crazy year for me. Following the drama of the age was the trauma of the melanoma diagnosis about six weeks after my birthday. All those years of Florida beaches and boats came back to bite me in the butt, or, rather, on my collar bone, to be site-specific. When I was a teenager in Miami Beach, I made my own suntan potion—a stick of cocoa butter, a good helping of baby oil, and some lemon juice melted together in a jar in the hot Florida sun—then shmeared it all over my body. I fried. Daily. For all the years of my teens. I had the best and darkest tan, and I felt so happy when the Miami Beach sun warmed me from head to toe. I suspect that the years of living on my boat in Key West didn't help my skin much either, but that teenage tan was perfection! Now, decades later, melanoma. I used to say, "If I have to die of something, it may as well be of a good tan." Not so much anymore. Careful what you ask for. The melanoma was caught very early by a smart young dermatologist who noticed the teensy-tiny spot that I completely missed on my routine body check. I was lucky. The surgery got it all. Today my magic sun potion begins with SPF 55.

As if melanoma weren't enough, my sister Sherry, two years younger than I, was diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer. Her diagnosis was far more fearful to my heart than my own melanoma. I couldn't bear to think that either of my sisters would suffer a horrible disease whose treatment is worse than the cancer itself. But Sherry is truly a grand survivor and has become my hero for what it means to be a strong, gracious woman. After the chemo, the removal of both her breasts, and then radiation, she's finally cancer-free. Prayers answered.

As I was settling in to being 60, I received some very sweet and unexpected gifts. I made full professor at UCLA, had several more academic publications, and was recognized as a Pillar of the Profession by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), my professional organization. In addition, I

was invited back to my graduate alma mater, the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, to keynote at their first Lavender Graduation where they honored the lives and achievements of their graduating gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students, an event I founded at the University of Michigan in 1995. They even named a student leadership award after me. I was touched beyond words. At the same time, I was named one of Curve magazine's "Top Twenty Powerful Lesbian Academics" (there are 20???), and identified as one of "Los Angeles' 25 People who Make You Melt" in *Frontiers*, a magazine for young gay men. (How on earth a 60-year-old lesbian grandma melts the hearts of those sweet young men is beyond me but I appreciated the sentiment.)

I chose to write this book for them, for their parents and families, for my own children and grandchildren, and for myself. I needed to finally speak out about the journey I've taken over my 60-some years. I want my children to understand how I yearned for them during our years of separation, and I hope people recognize their own qualities of resilience, passion, survival as they read about mine. Finally, I want to share lesbian and gay history as I lived it so that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) readers and their loved ones learn that our people didn't mysteriously pop out of a gay bar last Thursday night. We have a long and rich history, we LGBT folk, and it's there for the discovery.

While the history in this book is accurate—at least accurate in my own mind—I changed the names of some of the people because this is *my* memoir, not theirs. Their recollections may be—and probably are—much different from mine. I see no need to deliberately piss off people from my past any more than they may have been pissed off originally. You'll know which is which. Pseudonyms are first names only. Real names are first and last. Anyway, others must find voices to tell their own stories. I can tell only mine, and only from my own perspective. In addition, I include a boxed chronology at the beginning of many of the chapters for perspective. I want you, the reader, to understand what was happening socially and politically during those years and how my life—and perhaps yours—was imbedded in and affected by the culture of the day.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to all those folks through the years who encouraged me to write my story. It took a while, but their words stayed with me. I'm grateful to my dear friends Helen Schwartz, Melinda Moore, Jill Harris, Annie Goldman, and my sisters

Sherry Horwitz and Barbra Miner, who read much of this work in its early stages, provided feedback, and encouraged me to continue, and to Kristen Snyder who read the almost-final draft. I offer thanks to Peggy Schumacher for her feedback while on our Eco-Arts writing retreat in Costa Rica, and to the women on that trip who listened and offered ideas despite sitting in the humid Costa Rican jungle. I'm also grateful to Dr. Karen Derr who helped me process the painful events and feelings as they captured my attention in my consciousness. Don't do a memoir without your therapist nearby!

Regina Lark, my roommate and best pal, read many iterations of this work as she was building her own businesses. She generously provided tremendous encouragement, marketing tips, and really strong coffee the entire way. Barb Gottlieb, the best web diva ever, guided the technical part when I didn't know there *was* a technical part!

My life could never have been what it was and is without my two precious children, Berit and Erik. They suffered as much as I, yet it didn't stop them from coming "home" to me. Finally, I'm thankful for every person from my past, even the scary ones. Regardless of circumstances, I'm glad our paths crossed and our lives touched. I would have had a very different life experience had it not been for each one of them.

I'm 64 now. As I reflect back in these chapters, I realize that life has been good despite—or perhaps because of—the distant and recent crises: the loss of custody of my children; my poverty, transiency and homelessness; friends dying from AIDS; multiple failed relationships; depression; cancer; being fired from more jobs than I care to remember. Words in a Jimmy Buffet song describe how I feel today about my life's journey: "Some of it's magic, some of it's tragic, but it's been a good life all the way." Indeed...

I attended a workshop recently in which there was an ice-breaker that required participants to describe their very best day. "Are you kidding???" I proclaimed. "THIS is my best day. I woke up. I'm still here. It's good!" Today, this day, is my very best day. I have a large loving family including my parents who are in their 80s and still going strong; my children and grandchildren who fill my heart with deep pride and joy; my sisters and brothers, by birth or marriage to one another, who are my best friends; talented and passionate colleagues; and sweet loving friends. I have meaningful work at UCLA as a professor and Student Affairs professional, and I'm blessed to be surrounded every day by smart, excited, engaged

students. I have good health and a happy heart, and I have my purple golf cart.

I invite you to come along on this journey with me. It is a journey of reflection and resilience, of sharing stories about my life, of remembering from where I came. Perhaps something will resonate with your life experiences and you, too, will be motivated to write your story. My email is ronnisanlo@gmail.com. I hope you'll let me know what you think. In the meantime, hop aboard my purple golf cart and let's ride!

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