The Note

by Brenda Bishop Blakey

It was 1984 and *The Karate Kid* was a big hit. Every nut strapped on a black belt and offered karate lessons. The kids at school bullied me regularly and I really wanted to learn self-defense. Mom complained that there was no way we could afford to dole out 49 bucks a month for classes, much less buy the uniform and gasoline to go there. “Ricky,” she would start in, “You think the blue bird of happiness is just going to fly over and dump that money down our chimney?” Then she would really get on a roll. “Well, while he's at it, he can take over for me at the pub in the evenings while I chauffer you up and down the road to Bruce Lee lessons.” No wonder dad left.

It was 1984 and at the age of 12 I still believed I would go to hell if I touched myself and I was sure Mom could see through walls. Early on, I figured out she knew stuff because she regularly raided my wastepaper basket. She found a scribbled note that changed her mind about karate. It said ‘I want to die. I want to die. I want to die.' She locked the note up in a metal cash box, put it on the top shelf in her closet, tossed me into the forest-green Fiat and raced me to the nearest karate school. She paid two months in advance and told the teacher, “He needs to lose his baby fat and get some self esteem.” After that, I occasionally left well-placed notes that helped her see things my way.

It was 1984 and I knew that I would never be good at the whole martial arts thing. The sensei would tell me to find my internal chi and that would enable me to withstand a punch or make a kick. He would say, “All power is just behind your belly. Look. Knot of belt — just in front of navel — navel is eye of chi.” Then he would let out a scream as he buried his knee in my soft middle. Chi? What was it anyway? Some mumbo-jumbo, meta-physical, board-breaking trance? In my white uniform and belt I looked like a giant marshmallow just waiting to be smashed. Could chi do anything about that? I thought ‘there's never a bluebird of happiness around when you want one.'

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It was 1984 and I was about to find my chi. It was a sunny Sunday and Mom and I were washing the Fiat. The emergency brake must have failed or maybe I left it off while I was secretly pretending to drive. The car began to roll. Mom tried to stop it but the momentum swept her along. The car bowled her under and pinned her beneath the tire. I lunged for the bumper and lifted it off the ground in true Herculean effort while she dragged herself out from underneath. Miraculously, she was only bruised. We weren't quite sure what happened exactly. But, that day, I began to believe that there was always a bluebird of happiness around when you really needed one.

It is 2015 and it's been 3 weeks since the funeral. Natural causes. The nursing home insisted her room be cleared by month end. Fortunately, besides clothing, there was only her Bible, her scrapbooks, some trinkets of jewelry, a key and a locked cash box. I unlocked the cash box and found a bundle of hand written notes. The note on top of the bundle I remembered all too well. I read the familiar block print, ‘I want to die. I want to die. I want to die.' At some point during the last 31 years Mom had written on the bottom of the paper. It read, ‘Dear Ricky, thank you for all the notes, son. Each one helped me to be a better mother. Stay happy.'